1 Introduction

This is an Element about monotheism and divine aggression. More specifically, it makes an argument about the relation of the one, monotheism, to the other, aggression. The relation this Element proposes is that of cause and effect. Simply put, the Element claims that monotheism, or, as the case may be, monotheizing, makes the profile of the singular, mono-god more aggressive. The aggression of the god in question (the biblical god) is notorious: the phrase “Old Testament God” conjures up images of jealousy and wrath, smiting and judging. The present work doesn’t so much deny this impression as reframe it. By drawing texts about the biblical god alongside depictions of other gods, the Element aims to show that the biblical god is more aggressive than they are. His intensified destructiveness results from the Bible’s elevation of one god to supremacy.

This is, it should be clear, a theological argument, but only in the nontechnical sense that it concerns God, gods, and their descriptions. According to a more restrictive or technical definition, the Element is not theological, since it does not make an overt or sustained proposal about who God – the real, extratextual, living God – is, or about how current-day religious communities should comport themselves in relation to him. The Element’s ambit is, instead, historical and comparative: it considers the Bible as an ancient document alongside other writings from antiquity, and it ranges the biblical god alongside his divine neighbors. It is in recognition of the Bible as an artifact, and hence, too, of the god the Bible narrates, praises, and pleads to, that the present work lowercases “god” throughout. Whatever else the biblical god is, he is a character within the texts of Hebrew Scripture, and so comparable to gods preserved in other texts from the ancient world.

As is always the case, though, when writing about the biblical god, theological currents and convictions flow beneath the surface. Inherited words, expectations, and affects circulate in the chthonic realm of the author’s psyche, in disciplinary conventions, and in the cultural ether. Even while observing a historical stricture – striving neutrally to notice what data emerge through the exercise of juxtaposing the Bible with other historical realia – scholars often lapse into a theologically defensive or a theologically critical posture. They subtly promote the biblical god out of crypto-devotion, or they subtly war against him out of crypto-indignation at his long legacy, which has proven harmful for so many human lives. The present Element cannot transcend such slipstreams and undertows. But as a preliminary step toward the postbiblical career of the biblical god’s aggression, each of its sections takes care to include literary contexts and counterbalances. That is, even as the Element
demonstrates the amplified aggressiveness of the biblical god relative to other, textualized gods, it presents moments from the reception of the biblical texts in question. These interpretations of Yhwh’s aggression could fall under either of the above headings: whether out of religious loyalty or out of religious critique, they recontextualize and reconfigure the god’s destructive power.¹

To put a finer point on it: at specific times and under specific intellectual pressures, not all of which are recoverable, biblical writers concentrated divine powers into one god. This god, the god named Yhwh, therefore speaks and acts destructively, and in fact very destructively, given that divine destructiveness is not, for the most part, deputized in the Bible to some other under-god. Nothing and no one is safe from Yhwh’s destructiveness, because Yhwh alone enjoys the unshakable favor and safety inhering to divinity. But – and here is the finer point – this particular way of distributing divine aggression (or divine privilege) did not persuade all the inheritors of the biblical god. Whether devotion to Yhwh motivated them, or repugnance at some of Yhwh’s biblical conduct, or both – or neither, and it was simply a change of overall intellectual regime – subsequent “Yahwists,” both Jews and Christians, relaxed the biblical concentration of all divine powers into one god. The sections that follow track this interpretive development, and in this fashion they yield up fodder for sympathetic and indignant current-day readers alike.

In addition to being theological, historical, and comparative, the argument of the present Element mobilizes two further looming and troublesome concepts: monotheism and divine aggression. The first is troublesome because it is supersaturated. An immense literature addresses the rise of monotheism (or initial lack thereof) in ancient Israel, not to mention other enormous literatures that treat the viability of the concept for ongoing and constructive use. To gain any purchase, the present Element must winnow and clarify what it means by this fraught term. The second concept, divine aggression, suffers from an equal and opposite problem: it is unknown, even idiosyncratic. The angriness of the biblical god is nearly a cliché, a generic half-truth scattered culturally far and wide (think again of the biblical god’s popular reputation for smiting and judging). But “divine aggression” is not, at present, a phrase with any specific, programmatic value in academic discourse, whether of biblical studies, ancient Near Eastern studies, or theology more broadly. It, too, must receive a working definition, to save it from obscurity. Parts of the present section attempt just that, a twofold definition of terms. In closing, the present section provides a thumbnail sketch of the arguments that following Element sections build out.

¹ For the same reason as with the book’s capitalization of “god,” namely, to despecialize and thereby to make it more accessible for comparison with other gods, the book also lowercases the four-lettered divine name Yhwh.
Monotheism

“Monotheism” is, by common definition, the belief that there is only one god. Such belief subsists in the mind, or perhaps somewhere else in the human interior, but, at any rate, it identifies assent rather than, say, observable practice or performance. The content of that belief may also be rounded out. Affirming that there is only one god entails that other gods are not just off limits, neither are they merely subordinate, but that they do not exist at all. God alone is God.

This much seems almost commonsensical: monotheism = one + god + ism. And yet in spite of its wide reception, several problems accrue to this concept in its application to the Bible. First, there is the issue of anachronism. Monotheism is not a concept indigenous to the Bible’s own self-presentation. Rather, the term appears in English only from the seventeenth century onward. This means that wielding monotheism to gauge biblical texts risks shoehorning and even distorting the data. In a sense, though, this is a trivial concern, or at least a generic one. Many or most of the concepts that biblical scholars ply are postbiblical, anachronistic, and hence potentially distortive.

The more serious mismatch that “monotheism” poses is this: it is intellectualizing. To put it crudely, monotheism happens in the head; it is a philosophical proposition about the absolute number of gods. The term debuted as a tool to categorize religions: quite apart from their own self-conceptions, or the messy worlds of ethnicity, scripture, and ritual, the seventeenth-century English Platonists who invented “monotheism” used it to isolate one decisive and discriminating factor, an intellectual one: the asserted population of god(s). If, according to such-and-such religions, there was only ultimately one god, those religions are monotheistic; if more than one, then polytheistic.

The concept of monotheism thus sieves out an intellectual credendum from the religious river sludge (so to speak) that actually contains it. Note that this operation of separating out an intellectual proposition works regardless of the significance given by a religious tradition itself to such subscription, whether or not one-god-belief is a major focus of liturgy, prayer, or self-identity on the part of real religionists, or the particular rhetorical ends to which their confession of one god alone contributes. R. W. L. Moberly summarily articulates the problem:

“But monotheism” in the 17th century entailed a certain intellectualizing whereby believing in one god becomes assent to the proposition that the class of deity has only one member . . . rather than a kind of transformative and demanding awareness of reality that is rooted in, and inseparable from, a range of moral disciplines and symbolic practices [the religious river sludge!].”

When it comes to biblical texts that appear to profess the sole deity of Yhwh, the mismatch is acute. Whatever else the latter chapters of Isaiah are doing, for example, they are not primarily launching a philosophical point. When the Book of Isaiah declares on behalf of Yhwh, “I am Yhwh, and there is no other; besides me there is no god” (45:5a), its rhetorical purpose is not to retally the number of gods. Rather, this text and others like it seek to induce the sort of transformation and demand that Moberly mentions. They reassure and challenge the people of Israel. Interpreting a passage like this one as “monotheistic” – believing in but one god – can misdirect attention from what the prophet’s claim more holistically attempts.

The intellectualizing of “monotheism” abstracts from the existential and moral concerns within which any textual case of one-god-ism is embedded. It also loses traction on the particular recipients and transmitters of professions about one god. To return to the example of Isaiah: not only does this prophetic book aim at something other than intellectual subscription, it also aims specifically and programmatically at Israel. By design, however, “monotheism” is a category that transcends individual religious traditions; it stands outside of them and organizes them in a taxonomy. But this trans-religious intent differs radically from the communicative goal of the biblical texts that are oftentimes labeled monotheistic. The latter belong integrally to the relationship between Yhwh and Israel. To quote Robert Goldenberg:

Even when uttering apparently global claims on Yhwh’s behalf, the biblical writers may not have intended that those claims be understood globally. The world in Isaiah’s time was not yet familiar with the notion of universal religion, the notion that a religious truth ought to be true everywhere and at all times.3

In these ways, the problem of anachronism acquires more particularity and bite. The intellectualizing and universalizing features of “monotheism” misalign with the existential holism and national specificity of biblical texts. Sifting texts of Hebrew Scripture with this criterion could thereby mislead. Monotheism may then be, as some scholars have argued, a device unfit to plumb biblical literature.4 But anachronism is not the only or even the most pressing drawback. There is also a more practical limitation: most of what modern researchers have to work with is ancient texts; and such texts relate obliquely at best to what ancient persons thought, believed, and felt, let alone the larger communities of which ancient scribes were members. In other words, even if it could be proven that Isaiah 45 asserts a would-be universal truth (that there is only one god), this would not guarantee that the prophet or scribe who

3 Goldenberg, “Why Should the Look-Alikes Be a Problem?” 90.
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first wrote the chapter’s words held exactly to such a belief, nor that they held to it as an ongoing, inward conviction. Even less so would it automatically entail that the chapter’s addressees accepted its monotheistic claim. Rather, textual evidence simply and solely authorizes arguments about textual rhetoric.5

To some readers of the present Element, this practical limitation might appear too cautious, even impractically so. If a prophetic persona in the Bible says that there is only one god, someone aback of the text must have really believed that! This makes sense as an inference. But with regard to the Bible, it is often, even usually, difficult to locate the ancient persons responsible for composing the text. Biblical passages lack a caption; there is not for them a colophon as in some texts from the ancient city of Ugarit, when the scribe named Ilimilku declares, “I wrote this!” Even in biblical writings associated with an individual prophet such as Isaiah, much of the material under his name does not trace back to the historical personality. It requires some speculation to identify what person or persons behind the Bible could have espoused its occasional expressions of one-god-belief, if that is what they are.6

Without secure access to an individual behind the text, it still seems like a sound extrapolation that a community in front of the text must have supported its theology sufficiently to preserve and pass it along. Even if we must remain tentative about pinpointing monotheism to the psyche of one or another exilic (or postexilic) prophets who took up the name and mantle of Isaiah of Jerusalem, surely scholars are justified to think that some among the book’s recipients affirmed its high declarations that Yhwh alone is god and there is none besides him; otherwise they would not have taken pains to transmit these prolix oracles! This much is academically prudent. Someone agreed with Isaiah’s theology, or respected his authority. But who or how many or in what ways? Any but the vaguest further claim quickly runs up against the limits imposed by relevant data.

The previous part of the section already mentioned the fact that postbiblical Jewish and Christian traditions relaxed the biblical concentration of divine powers into one god, Yhwh. But this same history of reception adds a further caution to the attempt at leveraging biblical texts for insight into the beliefs of persons and communities that produced and circulated them. Isaiah and its bold Yhwh-alone declarations were copied and quoted numerously by ancient Jewish writers: the Dead Sea Scrolls, the apostle Paul, the New Testament evangelists. Yet all these writers also rather unselfconsciously treat other gods as real. Powers,

5 The present study has learned from Mark Smith’s emphasis on monotheistic discourse (Origins of Biblical Monotheism, 151–166).
6 On Ilimilku, see, inter alia, Wyatt, “The Evidence of the Colophons”; on the contrasting anonymity, even “self-subsumption,” of the Bible’s authors and editors, Chapman, Law and the Prophets, 99–104.
principalities, angels, archangels, and the heavenly temple itself—even “gods,” directly and as such—populate these writings. For them the monotheizing literary template of Hebrew Scripture did not preclude active belief, practice, and literary production assuming a multiplicity of divine beings.  

Other texts within Isaiah itself depict the reality and reach of divine beings besides Yhwh: the mythic sea dragon over whom Yhwh triumphs (Isa 51:9), the heavenly host at his service (Isa 40:1–8, 25–26; 45:12). These examples suggest that texts we might otherwise identify as monotheistic can accomplish something rhetorically that does not necessarily coincide with a behind-the-text belief that Yhwh is the only god who exists. Once more, for purpose of the present Element, the most trustworthy arguments are calibrated to the nature of the evidence: observations about the rhetoric of texts fit their profile as texts and do not seek to reach through them and beyond them into the world of belief, of the texts’ authors or their first readers.

As such, the procedure of the present Element is primarily textual. It reads biblical texts and compares them with other, ancient texts, and it pays attention to the rhetorical workings of these texts. Insofar as monotheism remains a useful conceptual tool for such a historical and comparative project, it must fit within these coordinates. And so the present Element defines monotheism away from belief. Instead of an intellectualizing or “heady” assent to a universal, trans-religious proposition about the numeration of gods, it takes monotheism as a textual phenomenon: a specific way of depicting gods “on the page.” Perhaps counterintuitively, the definition of monotheism this Element uses does not center on their absolute number. Narrating or discoursing about only one god is not what makes a text monotheistic; neither does narrating or discoursing about multiple gods necessarily render a text polytheistic. This Element’s definition of monotheism instead hinges on the (textual) distribution of divine powers.

For texts that are monotheistic, or better, texts that monotheize, other forces, fates, and powers in the universe ultimately answer to one god. The one god is not shown negotiating with them, praying to an older god, pursuing magical rituals, seeking to discover an already-established divine destiny. Odd as it may sound to readers familiar with a monotheistic frame of reference, all of these were live possibilities in ancient writings. Texts about Greek and Mesopotamian gods portray them as praying and working magic. They are also beholden to fate, a prior, “primal, meta-divine realm.” Even if the power of such praying and fate-bound gods vastly exceeds human power, there are yet deeper divine

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7 See Smith: “biblical claims of monotheism are generally rhetorical” (Origins of Biblical Monotheism, 154).
8 See Olyan, “Is Isaiah 40–55 Really Monotheistic?”
9 Lawson, Concept of Fate in Ancient Mesopotamia, 39, quoted in Chapman, “Miqreh and Yhwh,” 188.
powers to which they, too, report. Such texts are polytheistic in the sense that sovereignty is, at bottom, pluriform.

By contrast, monotheizing texts aggregate divine powers into one god.10 These texts may tell about many divine beings and their goings-on, but the sub-gods do not truly stand over against the one god. That god, the supreme god, may conscript them at his discretion, or destroy them at will. The one god holds the others in existence or wills them into nonexistence. Or, even more radically than creating or destroying, commanding or extinguishing, some ancient texts consider lesser gods as extensions or manifestations of the one god. Their agency and over-againstness is yet more reduced. Thus, for example, at least one Late Babylonian text claims about several major traditional gods that they are but names for the high god, Marduk.11 Even if it refers to multiple gods, a text like that one monotheizes in that it concentrates divine powers into one god.

As Benjamin Sommer has written, “distinguishing between monotheism and polytheism involves not counting divine beings but studying the relations among them.”12 For the present Element, these relations are not behind the text in the minds of antique writers, but available from their written word; and, to note, the exercise of distinguishing monotheism and polytheism is internal to the Jewish and Christian traditions. Biblical texts monotheize – but not all of them, and not in the same way – and postbiblical Jewish or Christian texts de-monotheize, redistributing divine powers away from a sole, central sovereign; and all this must be discerned through close scrutiny of just how these texts present god(s).

**Divine Aggression**

The second titular term the present section must define is “divine aggression.” Whereas monotheism is much discussed, divine aggression has no particular standing in scholarship on the Bible or the ancient Near East. If there is any keyword to which specialized studies have dedicated attention, it is to “divine wrath” or “divine anger.” Both of these terms have received a number of book-length investigations in recent decades, and these have advanced the discussion.13

The advantage of these works is their lexical discipline. They focus on vocabulary for “anger” in biblical and other ancient literature, and this lends

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10 This definition of monotheizing differs from another prominent exemplar, namely, James Sanders’s (*Monotheizing Process*), which posits not an innertextual phenomenon but rather a process that lies behind the production of texts – and which modern-day religious communities might reprise.


12 Sommer, “Yehezkel Kaufmann and Recent Scholarship,” 205.