

## I

**Introduction**

Going back to the 19th century, scholars observed that if Israel had an origin, its God must as well. In particular, the divine name peculiar to Israel, written with the consonants Yhwh, must have come from outside this people, and the only question was where. Yet there is no certain evidence for a god named Yahweh before the name's first appearance in a mid-9th century BCE royal inscription from Jordan, where the desecration of his sanctuary at Nebo follows its destruction by the king of Moab.<sup>1</sup> This victory was part of a campaign to expel the rival kingdom of Israel from the region north of Dibon, and Yahweh is identified with that enemy. The question remains nonetheless: How did Israel come to regard Yahweh as its divine patron, to share only with its immediate southern neighbor, the kingdom centered at Jerusalem? To the extent that we could peer behind the biblical tapestry, which renders Yahweh both Israel's special god and a deity with worldwide reach, we might catch a glimpse of the social landscape within which Israel took form.

This project begins in dialogue with the "origins" search, occupied with much of the same evidence and concerns, even as I decline to make the origin of Yahweh my object, preferring instead the idea that the name indeed existed outside the context of Israel and before it. I pursue "Yahweh before Israel" in two principal directions, one more obvious than the other. Reference to Yhwꜣ of Shasu-land in New Kingdom

<sup>1</sup> For the ancient concern of this project, all relevant evidence comes from before Roman times, and all dates are BCE ("Before the Common Era") unless obviously modern, related to 19th- or 20th-century scholarship, from the "Common Era" (CE). I will not generally mark the dates as one or the other.

Egyptian texts predates any evidence for the name Israel and is most likely older, certainly without connection to Israel. This Yhw<sup>3</sup> is “before Israel” by simple chronology. Equally important, however, is the likelihood that the god Yahweh and the people called Israel coexisted for some time in adjacent and eventually overlapping circles – or populations – so that the Bible itself preserves hints of this situation, where the deity must be understood “before” any relationship to Israel.

Throughout, this project is historical, not just as the history of religion but concerned with the whole landscape of populations in space and time. “History” recognizes the contingent character of identities, ideas, social forms, and practices on the constantly shifting conditions of those populations. As objects of historical investigation, both Yahweh and Israel are moving targets, each with character that changes through time. Approached historically, the names must be taken literally. By Israel, I mean any body that took this name in real time and place, not a catchall for what became the kingdom, the people of the Bible, or the Jews. Lauren Monroe and I have developed an analysis of biblical usage that recognizes expansion of its geographical application both in real time and in the Bible’s literary conception. Our distinctions are partial and exploratory, but they are intended to push forward a discussion also current among archaeologists.<sup>2</sup> We begin by separating “greater Israel” from what we call “little Israel,” neither one to consider a fixed entity, in recognition of a decisive move from a more limited geographical and political scale toward more ambitious expressions (Monroe, forthcoming a; Fleming forthcoming).<sup>3</sup> Little Israel certainly excludes Judah, but its specific location and extent remain elusive. We propose that earliest Israel is first visible in the Bible linked to distinct kingdoms identified with Saul and David in the southern central highlands and with the town of Tirzah further north. The identity of Israel with land north of the Jezreel and Kishon Valleys and east of the Jordan River was probably limited to particular regions and centers, beyond current reach to reconstruct. For the purposes of pursuing the early history of Yahweh, I mean Israel in this precise sense, so that peoples who eventually became part of Israel could have been associated with Yahweh before identification with Israel.

<sup>2</sup> One recent example is the volume of *Near Eastern Archaeology* (82/1 [2019]) devoted to “The Rise of Ancient Israel,” most notably the contribution by Israel Finkelstein (2019).

<sup>3</sup> Based first of all on archaeological evidence, Finkelstein (2019) likewise considers Israel to have grown in geographical extent, finally reaching what he calls “united (northern) Israel.”

## THE SEARCH FOR YAHWEH'S ORIGINS

At the foundations of monotheism stands the Jewish God, first of all the God of the Tanakh, the Christian Old Testament, named in two principal ways, as “(the) God” Elohim and by a proper name rendered with the consonants Yhwh, vocalized something like Yahweh. Both names present historical conundrums, but Yahweh is particularly difficult, the god of no people and no place before or outside Israel and Judah in the early first millennium BCE. The oldest non-biblical reference to Yahweh is found in a royal inscription of Mesha, king of Moab, around 840.<sup>4</sup> These days, the dates of biblical writing are severely disputed, with many in continental Europe attributing most of the text to formative Judaism, after the fall of both kingdoms, in the 6th through 3rd centuries. Who was Yahweh, in his early days, before he became the divine sponsor of Israel and the Jerusalem-based kingdom to its south? Is the question simply impenetrable?

As I began this project I had the sensation of having entered a completely new conceptual space, having discovered an entirely new way to think about Yahweh at the beginning, in the early days. I perceived the field of religious history as it relates to biblical studies to have reached a settled conclusion about Yahweh, that his absence from other peoples and their pantheons could be explained by his origin in the deserts south of Israel and Judah. This explanation has its own long history, beginning in the late 19th century with contemplation of the Kenites and their friendly relations with Israel and Judah, becoming more Midianite with focus on Moses and his father-in-law Jethro, “the priest of Midian” in Exodus 2 and 18. Modern formulations of the approach have little in common with the earliest ones and certainly approach the biblical texts with far greater hesitation.

I undertook my own contribution with what I perceived as a consensus as my target, what I will call for simplicity the Midianite Hypothesis of Yahweh's southern desert origins. In fact, there is no consensus and never was. There have always been serious outliers to this interpretation of Yahweh, and a new wave of these has gathered recent momentum from

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Schneider (2007) published a West Semitic personal name found in New Kingdom Egypt of the late 14th or 13th centuries, which he vocalized as *'adōnī-rō'ē-yāb*, “My lord is the shepherd of Yah.” In this name, the theophoric (divine) element is *'adōnī*, “My lord,” not *yāb*, and this does not represent convincing evidence for the divine name. We will return to this personal name in Chapter 2, in discussion of the Egyptian evidence. For systematic review of all the inscriptional evidence from the earliest alphabetic material, see Theodore Lewis (2020b), chapter 6, “The Origins of Yahweh.”

a challenge by Christoph Levin, Reinhard Müller, and others. Rather, I realize that I have long considered Yahweh's origins in the southern steppe to be by far the best explanation for the evidence, for all the varieties of reasoning. My quarrel is with the system that I already find most plausible, and my own proposal takes form against the backdrop of that system. I will set out to repudiate the contemporary Midianite Hypothesis even as my undertaking will betray a kinship to it more marked than to any alternative. I do not think Yahweh began as any form of "The God" El, and I do not think Yahweh was first of all a local highland storm god of the Hadad type.

My own approach shares with the Midianite Hypothesis a focus on the back country and populations not identified by cities and towns. The Egyptian evidence is decisive to my analysis: the name Yhw<sub>3</sub> designates a Shasu group, a Yhw<sub>3</sub>-people. So far as this ancient people-name from the early 14th century is in fact to be identified with the later divine name Yahweh (Yhwh), we must begin our interpretation of the deity with the reality of this alignment, or even equation, of god and people. I suggest that the Bible preserves traces of these roots in its designation of a "people of Yahweh" in the Song of Deborah (especially Judg 5:13). In the end, the Midianite Hypothesis and the conclusion that Yahweh originated in the desert south represent less a target than a context, the right point of reference, badly in need of reconception. Along with so many before me, I still find this the right place to start.

Scholars in the late 19th and early 20th century relied on the Bible alone to prove that Yahweh was first worshipped among the peoples of the southern wilderness: the Kenites, the Midianites, and others. This may seem obvious for the time, when we may imagine an absence of evidence for the larger ancient context. On the contrary, the 19th century was a time of rapidly accelerating knowledge on all fronts, including the decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphs and Mesopotamian cuneiform, and the very endeavor to understand the early religious history of Israel responded to a torrent of information about the ancient Near East. Scholars turned to the Bible for reliable direction because the name Yahweh was so difficult to find elsewhere – and the efforts to do so were myriad. The problem with reliance on the Bible to prove that Yahweh was first worshipped by other peoples is that the texts themselves, unsurprisingly, do not see things that way, and an outside origin has to be found in what are imagined to be embedded traditions that carry older realities. Returning to the material that has been brought to bear on the question, I do not find such old religious tradition.

Generally, the biblically grounded Midianite Hypothesis has presented a thoughtful alternative to generations of unconvincing proposals that the name of Yahweh can be found in other Near Eastern evidence. With all its laryngeal consonants and glides, the divine name can sound like a sigh, and the malleable spellings of cuneiform in particular may produce forms that could be read as this god. For all the many attempts, either the phonology or the context fails to convince, and Yahweh remains unknown outside Israel and Judah.<sup>5</sup> As already observed, there is one crucial exception, from 14th- and 13th-century Egypt, which though mysterious and open to debate, can be disposed of only by convenience and demands explanation in relation to Israel's god. Given the absence of Yahweh from god lists and god references for Canaan and Syria in the second millennium BCE, it is expected that Israel's god came from a region outside what is most settled and best documented. The Egyptian references suit such a requirement, and the Bible's account of Israel with Moses in the wilderness would do so as well. Thus the hypothesis of Yahweh's origins in the deep south of Sinai and Midian, Edom and Seir, still survives, for all that the older expressions of this approach have demanded considerable revision and refinement.<sup>6</sup>

And yet it should give pause that an interpretive framework for explaining the foundational character of Yahweh, the particular god of Israel, derives from and still displays the main outlines of ideas set in place in the 19th century.<sup>7</sup> At that time, the questions that inspired this solution and the evidence available for consideration were embedded in a different intellectual landscape, and it is worth weighing how the changing times

<sup>5</sup> Thomas Römer (2015: 35–38) gives particular attention to proposals from the texts of Ebla, Ugarit, and Mari, concluding that none of these persuades. In the late 8th century, it is more plausible that Azri-yau and Yau-bidi of Hamath bore theophoric personal names with Yahweh, as first proposed by Dalley (1990). If this analysis is correct, the names would not derive from pre-Israelite Syrian worship of Yahweh but rather from Israelite influence (cf. Younger 2016: 492–93).

<sup>6</sup> The most recent major statement is in Römer's monograph, along with the articles collected in van Oortschot and Witte (2017); see also Blenkinsopp (2008), Smith (2012), Tebes (2017); cf. Kitz (2019). Note that efforts to explore the religious possibilities of the southern desert in the second millennium, even if focused on noteworthy archaeological data, take for granted the framework of the Midianite Hypothesis, as with Amzallag (2009) and Tebes (2017); cf. Anderson (2015: 100–2).

<sup>7</sup> In this sweeping allusion to scholarship on ancient religion I evoke terminology that Michael Stahl (2020) examines in precise terms, through the "god of Israel" title. He observes in his introduction that "scholars regularly employ the appellation 'god of Israel' as a kind of transhistorical or universalizing identity to refer to the god of the Hebrew Bible, of ancient Israel and Judah, and of earliest Judaism."

might require more sweeping critique. In Germany, beginning with a challenge issued by Christoph Levin when he took a new position at the University of Giessen in 1996, the post-monarchic dating of much biblical writing has generated its own doubt of southern origins. If the Bible's recollection of Yahweh in the southern wilderness must be explained by early Jewish ruminations that offer no threads of real religious history, there is no reason to seek the god's origins anywhere but the land of Israel itself, even if no evidence survives.<sup>8</sup>

My own critique does not derive from the same interpretation of compositional dates, though the settings and associations of the key texts are essential concerns. Instead, my attention was drawn initially to the potential antiquity of Yahweh's presence in other biblical texts that link him to the lands of Israel and Judah.<sup>9</sup> For all that El is a major god known far beyond the geographical space eventually occupied by these kingdoms, it has never been necessary to imagine the borrowing of his worship from distant peoples. El could have been part of the religious landscape before Israel, not the unique possession of that people. What would it mean to take seriously the relative antiquity of Yahweh's presence in this same space?

Read as a unity, the Song of Deborah (Judges 5) locates Israel by its identification with peoples who join to fight or were expected to do so, according to verses 14–18, and the list lacks any interest in Jerusalem or what became the kingdom of Judah. Yahweh goes to battle as “god of Israel” from lands much further south, Seir and Edom (v. 4), but the people who worship him overlap solidly with the geography of the later kingdom of Israel. What struck me above all was the contrast between the geographies of Yahweh's mysterious residence in the distant southern wilderness and of the peoples who worshipped him, obvious though it may seem, in what became the land of Israel. Why should the Song sustain an interpretation of Yahweh's origin in that southern region, when it displayed no notion of his worship there?

<sup>8</sup> See first of all Levin (2000). In the recent collection devoted to *The Origins of Yahwism* (van Oorschott and Witte, 2017), the resulting “Berlin hypothesis” is represented by Henrik Pfeiffer and Reinhard Müller, both of whom have produced monographs that develop key elements of this critique (Pfeiffer, 2005; Müller, 2008). In the judgment of Martin Leuenberger (2017), the new approach suffers from a relative lack of positive evidence for the alternative, depending mainly on Müller's analysis of Yahweh as storm god in monarchic psalms.

<sup>9</sup> This entire line of reevaluation began in conversation with Rachel Angel, a doctoral student at New York University, who has my appreciation for her provocative questions.

By the time when I began to reconsider the early history of Yahweh, however, I could no longer regard the named groups of the battle account in Judg 5:14–18 as Israel in their initial conception (Fleming 2012: 64–66). All eight references to Israel in the Song of Deborah appear in the opening hymn (vv. 2–11) and thus reinterpret the battle by what Sara Milstein (2016) terms “revision through introduction.” This observation, which Mark Smith affirmed and built into his own detailed studies of Judges 5, has become one element in ongoing work with Lauren Monroe on how peoples and space were named in the early Iron Age (Monroe and Fleming 2019).<sup>10</sup> The significance for Yahweh lies in the possibility, not preferred by Smith, that the peoples of the battle account would still share a common identity, as simply “the people of Yahweh” (*‘ām Yhwh*, v. 13).<sup>11</sup>

Renditions of the Midianite Hypothesis over generations have shared the notion that Israel must have come to worship Yahweh as a deity that existed before itself – without adequate consideration of how “Israel” related to other named groups that eventually became part of the kingdom. It is one thing to consider Midianites and Kenites, or Esau and the people of Edom, kin to Israel, but what about Ephraim or Gad? According to the Mesha inscription of the mid-9th century, “the men of Gad” (*’iš Gad*, line 10), had occupied the land of ‘Aṭarot “since forever” (*mi’ōlam*), without and before evident connection to Israel. The same could be said of Ephraim, Benjamin, and Amalek as first participants with the people of Yahweh in Judg 5:14, and the relationship to Israel of the other parties to this alliance against the kings of Canaan remains unclear.<sup>12</sup> It is therefore possible that Yahweh could have played a role among groups that came to be part of the Israelite kingdom before this identification.

It is time to reassemble all the pieces of this familiar puzzle in a fresh framework, not seeking a god foreign to Israel but one that belonged to a

<sup>10</sup> My first articulation of the observation about Israel in the Song of Deborah was in a draft of *The Legacy of Israel in Judah's Bible* (Fleming 2012a), and Smith (2009) acknowledged it with citation of that work, and took it up again in his extended treatment of the Song in his *Poetic Heroes* (Smith 2014: 245 n.57).

<sup>11</sup> Note that the Masoretic vocalization separates the “people” from Yhwh, where the genitival combination would give us *‘ām Yhwh*. For Smith (2014: 245–46), with Fritz (2006), the main account of the battle does not involve Yahweh. The *‘ām Yhwh* in both verses 11 and 13 belong to introductory revision, and Yahweh’s curse in verse 23 is a quotation from a separate source that identified the god with a similar conflict (240–41).

<sup>12</sup> This question has dogged Lauren Monroe in her ongoing work on the Song, articulated in two initial forms in her articles on “greater Israel” (forthcoming) and on *mērōz* (2019).

political landscape in which Israel played a relatively small role. In searching for Yahweh outside what the Bible presents as a large regional Israel, we are driven far afield, into the wilderness, including the deep southern spaces of the Midianite Hypothesis. As many have found previously, the wilderness is indeed relevant, and the south remains one part of that realm, but the retrojection of later Israelite geography onto older settings has distracted us from peoples who lived cheek to jowl with Israel in lands long central to the biblical narrative. This landscape before the kingdoms of Israel and Judah opens up space to consider “Yahweh before Israel,” both in the 14th-century Yhw3 of Shasu-land and in the “people of Yahweh” of Judges 5.<sup>13</sup>

Much that appears historically true and biblically interesting has been observed in pursuit of the Midianite Hypothesis, but the Bible’s fascinating attraction to back country pastoralists can offer only an indirect indication of potential cultural and religious affinities, not a straight line to Yahweh. This conclusion does not repudiate the past generations of research on Israelite religion but rather embraces it with an enthusiastic push to abandon the interpretive clothes into which it has been stuffed. The research itself gives us something new and opens up lines of future inquiry still not even imagined.

#### THE MIDIANITE HYPOTHESIS

In a recent elaboration, Joseph Blenkinsopp (2008) conveniently characterizes the Midianite Hypothesis as argued from four lines of evidence:

- stories of Moses and Midian in Exodus 2 and 18;
- references to Yahweh coming from the south in old poetry such as Judges 5;
- the name Yahweh in 14th- and 13th-century Egyptian texts, identified with Seir;<sup>14</sup>
- and interpretation of Cain as ancestor of the Kenites, with first worship of Yahweh in Genesis 4.

<sup>13</sup> I have preferred not to define the object of this study by “origins,” a category that can be entangled with problematic assumptions and that tends to stand out of reach, though the term offers a clear objective. On the broader preoccupation with origins in relation to Yahweh, see the final article in *The Origins of Yahwism* (2017), by Friedhelm Hartenstein.

<sup>14</sup> More precisely, the Egyptian texts name Yhw3 as one unit of Shasu-land; Blenkinsopp does not hesitate to equate the Shasu name with the divine name.



The first and last of these were integral to early generations of discussion, and all the evidence pertains to biblical prose. The other two were added in the mid-20th century, not just as novel arguments but also representing completely different categories, with biblical poetry that many understand to be older than the prose and with Egyptian texts that provide essential non-biblical evidence from before the period of the kingdoms. These three bodies of material give form to Chapters 2–4 in my own reconsideration, and a brief review of their combination will give a sense of the current state of affairs.

In 1872, Cornelis Tiele proposed a new direction for understanding the first worship of Yahweh, sharing the common expectation that this should not have begun in Israel by divine revelation. The question was where to look for a historical source. Tiele saw two previous alternatives: that Yahweh came from Egypt by way of Moses; and that he was a Canaanite god picked up by Israel after arrival in the land, and against these he proposed that Yahweh was a desert god, associated especially with biblical peoples called Rechabites and Kenites (see Chapter 3). With time, though the Kenite connection remained, this interpretation of Yahweh's origins came to be associated with Moses and his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian, at the center of the Bible's own account of how Israel came to have a particular god by this name. This approach has been called both Kenite and Midianite, as well as Midianite-Kenite, but for the sake of simplicity and in recognition of the frequent focus on the Exodus narrative, I will call it the Midianite Hypothesis, as a proper noun.<sup>15</sup>

When the Midianite Hypothesis was first proposed, the archaeology of the land of Israel was in its infancy, or perhaps only a twinkle in some mother's eye, and little beyond the Bible could provide illumination. Nonetheless, the ancient Near East was beginning to emerge as a concrete reality, accessible through the monuments of Egypt and Mesopotamia, with the scripts of both deciphered by 1822 and the 1850s, respectively.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Mark Smith (personal communication) would even add "Shasu" to the Midianite-Kenite combination, maintaining continuity with the long-standing interpretive approach.

<sup>16</sup> Each story is more complicated. In 1822 Jean-François Champollion deciphered the hieroglyphs of the Rosetta Stone, a single decisive breakthrough that marks the first availability of Egyptian writing, though the hieratic script is equally important for the language; the decipherment of the Old Persian and Akkadian inscriptions at Behistun in Iran began a process that took longer, from the 1830s through the 1850s. For the decipherment of hieroglyphs starting with the Rosetta Stone, see Parkinson (1999); and for cuneiform, with references, Peter Daniels (1995) and Cathcart (2011).

Along with more easily comprehensible alphabetic inscriptions known by the mid-19th century, as well as old lore from Classical sources, the rising tide of new sources from Egypt and Mesopotamia were what motivated Tiele's comparative history of ancient religions, including his fresh effort to locate Yahweh and Israel in the midst of these. It was apparent that the Bible would have to be read in the company of independent evidence from its world. God may always have had a past, but with the emerging Near East, he would have to have a history.

Tiele's initial Midianite (Kenite) Hypothesis shared with earlier proposals the determination to abandon all explanation of Israelite and biblical religion by special divine revelation, in favor of a historical framework and what were judged rational arguments for discerning the merits of all ancient religious ideas and practice. It was taken for granted that the biblical, and eventually Christian though unavoidably Jewish, religion of the Hebrew Bible could be considered superior to all others on purely rational grounds, a perspective that is easily dismissed today. Yet the adaptable character of the project in its historical aims explains how the Midianite Hypothesis could remain viable through substantial transformations of its formulation. Contemporary versions of the Midianite Hypothesis take their form from discoveries after the time of Tiele, with two principal contributions.

First, with the newly discovered "Ugaritic" language as primary reference point, a trend led especially by William Foxwell Albright and his students isolated a selection of biblical poetry that could be regarded as directly ancient, transmitted without linguistic updating or narrative adjustment. As such, it provided a treasury of historical information that could be exploited without dependence on the contested results of literary-historical research on biblical prose, the ongoing effort to reconstruct the composition and revision of each book and combination.<sup>17</sup> The

<sup>17</sup> Albright (1922) already identified certain biblical poems as very old based in part on the expectation that they were composed close to the time of the events portrayed, especially the Song of Deborah in Judges 5 and David's lament over Saul and Jonathan in 2 Samuel 1. Excavations at Ugarit began in 1929, with decipherment of its alphabetic cuneiform script following quickly. Albright (1945) took the evidence from Ugarit to confirm his earlier judgments on biblical poetry generally, without focus on older material in particular, though he identified individual texts that could be analyzed afresh in light of the new language evidence (1944). The work of making a systematic argument fell to two of his students, Frank Moore Cross and David Noel Freedman, whose joint Johns Hopkins dissertation (1950) was defined as *Studies in Ancient Yahwistic Poetry*, eventually published without change in 1975 with a second edition in 1997. Cross and Freedman remark the availability of two new techniques for evaluating biblical language and