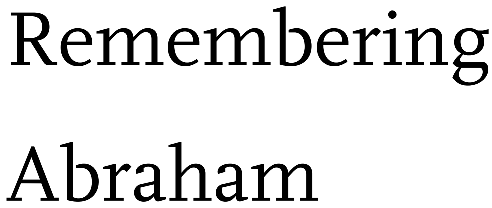

Remembering Abraham

Culture, Memory, and History in the Hebrew Bible

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Contents

1. Israel Among the Nations: Biblical Culture in the Ancient Near East, 3

2. Remembering Abraham, 31

3. Historical Memories in the Patriarchal Narratives, 45

4. The Exodus in Biblical Memory, 57

5. The Archaeology of Memory: Solomon, History, and Biblical Representation, 75

6. The Biblical Sense of the Past, 95

Appendix: Linguistic Notes on the Age of Biblical Literature, 109

Abbreviations, 119

Notes, 123

Bibliography, 165

Index of Biblical Citations, 189

General Index, 195

I

Israel Among the Nations

Biblical Culture in the Ancient Near East

This book is dedicated to exploring the Hebrew Bible's portrayal of Israel and its past, and to correlating the biblical past with our sense of the past. The past as perceived and the past as reconstructed will be held together, even if incompletely, to yield its intricate story. To begin this tale of history and biblical narrative—of the past and Israel's self-fashioning—Israel was a people of the ancient Near East, but a self-consciously unique member of that cultural family. Israel differentiated itself from its ancient neighbors by constructing and maintaining a variety of cultural, religious, and ethnic boundaries. From its beginning and throughout its history, these boundaries were subject to negotiation, critique, and revision. One of the earliest descriptions of Israel's sense of distinctiveness in the ancient Near East is, perhaps surprisingly, attribute to a foreign seer, Balaam. The prominent role of this Aramean prophet provides an entry into the complex interplay of Israel's collective identity, its perceptions of the past, and its place in the ancient world.

Balaam's Voice

After defeating King Og of Bashan, whom biblical tradition remembers as a giant,[1] Moses and the Israelites camp in the plains of Moab,

east of the Jordan River. Frightened at their numbers, the King of Moab summons the foreign seer Balaam to curse this people, but instead of a curse, Balaam pronounces God's blessing. As Balaam tells the story:

> From Aram has Balak summoned me,
> the king of Moab from the eastern mountains.
> "Come, curse Jacob for me,
> come, condemn Israel!"
> But how can I curse what God has not cursed,
> how can I condemn what Yahweh has not condemned?
> For I see them from the top of the mountains,
> from the hills I gaze upon them.
> Behold, it is a people dwelling apart,
> not counting itself among the nations.
> Who can count the dust of Jacob,
> who can number the dust-cloud of Israel? (Num 23:7–10)[2]

Balaam perceives that Israel is a unique people whom God has blessed, a people set apart from the usual run of ancient Near Eastern nations.

My theme is taken from Balaam's description of Israel as "a people dwelling apart, not counting itself among the nations." Israel was a nation and a culture of the ancient Near East, yet it saw itself as different and somehow incommensurate with the other nations. On one level, this sense of uniqueness is far from unique: it is the root of nationalism and ethnicity in its many forms.[3] The Greeks denoted non-Greeks as barbarians (*barbaroi*) because they did not speak Greek, the language of civilized people. The Egyptians referred to themselves as "people" (*remeṯ*), implicitly—and sometimes explicitly—evoking the nonpeoplehood of others. But, on another level, the ancient Israelite claim to uniqueness was more forceful than most peoples' and more central to its self-definition.[4] Indeed, it is arguable that this claim to uniqueness was in some measure self-fulfilling, enabling the Jewish people to outlive all the other cultures of the ancient Near East. By persisting in its claim to uniqueness, and by routinizing this claim in its religious and cultural habits, the Jewish people made that uniqueness a historical reality. The fact of its being alive today, roughly three millennia later, seems to ratify Balaam's perception that this is a people apart.

The boundaries that biblical culture set about itself were in a sense more permanent and decisive than those of its ancient peers. Elsewhere in the ancient Near East, one could identify one's own gods and religious practices with those of other nations.[5] For example, the Egyptians could adopt Canaanite gods and their mythology into the Egyptian religious system simply by equating

them with native gods (Baal = Seth, El = Ptah, etc.). The standard formula of international treaties required that both party's gods participate as witnessess, acknowledging a degree of communication and mutual recognition among the gods of different cultures. Although the names, languages, and local practices might differ, there was a consciousness of a basic cultural translatability in the ancient Near East. Ancient Israel seems to have been the exception to this rule.[6] Israelite writings from the earliest period repeatedly sound the theme of nontranslatability, of the birth of something new and different.

The choice of the seer Balaam to announce this basic difference reveals some interesting aspects of Israel's claim to uniqueness. Balaam is a foreigner—he is identified as an Aramean from the eastern mountains—and we now know that he was a figure of some repute in other neighboring cultures. In 1967 a Dutch excavation at Tell Deir ᶜAlla, not far from the plains of Moab, discovered an inscription from the eighth century B.C.E. that relates the oracular vision of "Balaam, son of Beor" (בלעם ברבער), the "man who was a seer of the gods" (אש חזה אלהן הא).[7] The language of this inscription is a Northwest Semitic dialect not hitherto known, sharing some distinctive features with Ammonite and Aramean. This is an inscription of one of Israel's neighbors, showing us the continuity of religious and literary traditions—and their *dramatis personae*—in the West Semitic cultural sphere. Balaam, it seems, was an exemplar of the virtuous foreign seer. His dual status as a true seer and a foreigner makes him an apt figure to proclaim the uniqueness of Israel in the biblical narrative. As a foreigner he is not prone to Israelite partisanship, and as an inspired seer he speaks only the truth. But, at the same time, the fame of Balaam in West Semitic traditions shows that Israelite traditions were not unique, that is, they shared a common root and repertoire with Israel's neighbors. The voice of Balaam subtly proclaims that Israel was not wholly a nation apart.

In contrast to this early portrait of Balaam, later biblical traditions had trouble assimilating the idea of him as a virtuous foreign seer. The doctrine of cultural and religious uniqueness, which Balaam announces, led perhaps inevitably to a reevaluation of his character. In later biblical writings, this righteous Gentile is recast in the common stereotype of the dangerous and/or stupid foreign Other. In the Priestly source—dating from roughly the sixth century B.C.E.[8]—Moses blames Balaam for inciting Israelite men to have sex with foreign women, a grievous sin in God's eyes, and Balaam dies in battle as his just punishment (Num 31:8, 16). In a later postexilic supplement to the story, Balaam is derided as more stupid than his donkey, since even the donkey can see the angel of God (Num 22:22–35).[9] The foreign seer who sees truly has been transformed into an agent of sin and a blindly blundering fool. These are

typical biblical tropes for the foreign Other: obtuse, seductive, and/or evil. The bitter side of Israel's claim to uniqueness is revealed by its inability to preserve Balaam's virtue in its narrative traditions. The righteousness of the foreign seer was lost in translation.

Interestingly, the chief exceptions to the disparagement of foreigners in the Bible are foreign women. Tamar in Genesis 38, Rahab in Joshua 2, Jael in Judges 4–5, and Ruth in the book of her name are the paradigm examples of the righteous foreigner, and all are women. This situation turns the table on Balaam's sin of inciting Jewish men to have sex with foreign women, since in at least two out of these four instances, the virtuous act of the foreign women involves having sex with Jewish men. (The Rahab story is ambiguous on this issue, though she is a prostitute by profession.) Tamar's seduction of Judah and Ruth's seduction of Boaz result in the restoration of an Israelite lineage that would otherwise have been lost—the lineage that produces King David. Without their exceptional actions, the line of Judah would have been forfeit, and David would have never been born. The virtues of these foreign women have to do with their preservation of the tribal patriline. Because they are foreigners, their virtues are extraordinary, and their seduction of Jewish men is, in these cases, a moral good. Tamar and Ruth are the antitheses to the late portrayal of Balaam.

The Bible presents many ways of defining and negotiating the boundaries between Israel and the foreign nations. In this essay I will address some of the ways that biblical culture approached the differences between Israel and its Others. The questions involved—Who is an Israelite? What are the distinctive structures of Israelite religion? What are the implicit boundaries of Israelite culture?—are both historical and hermeneutical, that is to say, they touch upon what really happened in the history of ancient Israel *and* how these events and circumstances were interpreted in the biblical writings. But first a caveat—history does not come neat or plain in these writings; the Hebrew Bible consists in large part of interpretations and reflections on history—more a midrash on the times than the times themselves. But, of course, this is part of what makes the Bible a timeless book. Interpretation or commentary is, as Gershom Scholem observed, part of the essence of Judaism.[10] This process of making sense of texts and things begins in the interpretations and contested meanings within the Hebrew Bible.

One of these conflicts of interpretation, we shall see, concerns the nature of Israel's relations with its foreign Others. Balaam's statement is not the last word on Israel's distinctiveness in the Hebrew Bible. A dialectic of sharing and distancing, of inclusion and estrangement, characterizes biblical culture from its earliest sources to its latest.

The Cultural Construction of Israel

The origins of Israel in history are obscure. In the year 1207 B.C.E., the Egyptian pharaoh Merenptah stated in a royal inscription that he had conquered Israel (among other peoples) in a military campaign through Canaan. The key line reads in Egyptian: "Israel is laid waste, his seed is no more."[11] Merenptah overstated the case, as was conventional in royal inscriptions, since Israel continued to exist. In spite of its pharaonic hyperbole, the Merenptah stele provides the earliest textual evidence outside of the Bible for Israel's existence as a people in the Near East.

The archaeological evidence shows that beginning in the late thirteenth century B.C.E.—around the time of this inscription—there was significant population expansion in the central highlands of the land of Israel.[12] This new group of highland settlers was presumably the people Merenptah called Israel—or possibly Israel was one of several groups in the highlands at this time. The settlements excavated by archaeologists share a number of similar cultural features. They are small, unwalled villages, some probably no more than the dwellings of extended families. There are no signs of social stratification or permanent military establishments. The material culture in general is a local, rural development of Canaanite culture.

This evidence indicates that early Israel was largely a local culture, a variant of regional Canaanite or West Semitic cultural traditions. If this was so—if Israel was a frontier society in the now habitable highlands—then how did being an Israelite differ from being a rural Canaanite or an Ammonite or a Moabite? (Ammon and Moab were neighboring cultures coming into being at roughly the same time as Israel.) This essential question concerns the construction of ethnic identities and cultural boundaries in this period.

Recent research has demonstrated that culture and ethnicity are more matters of belief and custom than they are proof of common descent. In the memorable title of one such study, nations or ethnic groups are "imagined communities,"[13] imagined into existence by those who believe in the group and participate in its social interactions. In the case of ancient Israel, the imagination that flows into the construction of a cultural identity is, at least in part, preserved for us in the biblical portrayal of Israel's origins. The most important of these imaginative constructs are the stories of the Exodus-Sinai-Wanderings period, related in the books of Exodus through Deuteronomy.

These stories can be regarded not only as a national biography,[14] but also as a historical engine for the construction of cultural identity. That is, the stories not only narrate the life of a nation, but they also functioned in historical time

as a key agent in the formation of the nation they narrate. Early Israel included, in the words of the biblical story, "a mixed multitude" (Exod 12:38). Many of the people who settled in the early highlands community would have fit this description—they probably included peasant farmers and pastoralists, fugitives and bandits, and escaped slaves. How did they become incorporated into a cohesive social community? In no small part this transformation of identity was created by shared belief in a common story—the Exodus from Egypt, the revelation at Sinai, the wanderings in the wilderness, and the passage as a unified people into the Promised Land. These stories, in their aggregate, constitute a collective rite of passage for the people of Israel, transforming a mixed multitude from their former identity as slaves in a foreign land into a new identity as a free people—God's people—in a land of promise and plenty.[15]

Even if some or many of these formative events did not really happen in the way that they are told, they were—and still are—felt and understood to be a shared memory of a collective past. Such stories of an epic past function as a symbolic shaper of community, joining people together around a common ethnic, cultural, and religious identity. The celebrations and tales of the Exodus create and periodically reaffirm this common identity. The most obvious example is the Passover meal, the Seder, which includes the retelling of the Exodus story as an expression of the continued collective significance of the deliverance from Egypt. Jewish identity, from its beginnings to the present day, is formed in no small part by the recitation of these stories.

The function of ethnic identity-formation bound up with these stories is at times directly indicated in the biblical writings. In the midst of the plague narratives, God tells Moses that he is performing these deeds "so that you will tell your children and your children's children how I dealt with Egypt and how I brought my signs upon them, so that you [plural] will know that I am Yahweh" (Exod 10:2). Knowing God's power and identity seems to be the point of these deeds and the point of preserving their memory in stories. But knowing God's identity also has a social correlate—knowing that Israel is God's people. This is emphasized in God's repeated promise: "I will be your God and you will be my people." In his command that the Israelites recount the story to their children and grandchildren, God seems to acknowledge that the stories of his great deeds on behalf of his people are a narrative that binds the people together as a cohesive religious community (similarly Exod 12:24–27, 13:8). The command to tell these stories in each generation is, in a sense, a self-fulfilling command that constructs the cultural identity of its primary audience.

The cultural boundaries of early Israel were, at least in part, constructed by the dissemination of stories about the deliverance of Israel from Egyptian bondage and the birth of a free people in the Promised Land. It is important

to note that even Israelite settlers who had never been slaves in Egypt could easily participate in this narrative memory, for Egypt had been the overlord of Canaan for several centuries previously (ca. 1500–1150 B.C.E.). Egyptian rule during this period had often been harsh, including the regular export of Canaanites to Egypt to serve as slaves.[16] With the waning of the Egyptian Empire in Canaan, the memory of oppression and slavery and the concomitant memory of deliverance to freedom would have resonated in the drama of the Exodus story.[17] By adopting this story as their own, the villagers in the highlands became Israelites, and a mixed multitude crystallized its collective identity as the people of Yahweh.

Genealogy and Differences

One of the ways that the ancient Israelites joined together was by forming genealogical alliances. In so doing, they defined who was an Israelite and who was an outsider. The difference between inside and outside inevitably became charged with moral difference, with the insiders superior to the outsiders. This is a universial human trait, egoism on a national scale.

Sigmund Freud once commented, somewhat diffidently, on the reasons that closely related peoples disparage one another:

> I once interested myself in the peculiar fact that peoples whose territories are adjacent, and are otherwise closely related, are always at feud with and ridiculing each other. . . . I gave it the name of "narcissism in respect of minor differences," which does not do much to explain it.[18]

This trait of cultural narcissism is strongly at work in the genealogical stories in the Bible, primarily in Genesis, in which the relations between Israel's ancestors and the ancestors of other nations are recounted. In these stories, the cultural boundaries of Israel are continually endangered by the presence of the ancestors of other peoples, and the Israelites survive the slings of fortune by varying means—including virtue, guile, and divine intervention. Before we turn to these stories, let us examine more closely the importance of genealogies and genealogical narratives in the construction of cultural identity.

A genealogy shows, in a memorable way, who is related to whom. In many small-scale societies, including early Israel, genealogical relations are the internal boundaries of society. That is, person X and person Y are both members of the same society because at some level of the national or tribal genealogy they descend from a common ancestor. The degree of distance from the com-

mon ancestor determines the particular status of the relationship between the two persons. For example, in a patrilineal society such as ancient Israel (where descent is measured on the male side), two siblings are related because of a common father, two cousins by a common grandfather, two members of the same "clan" (משפחה) by a common ancestor of the clan, two tribesman by a common ancestor of the tribe, and two Israelites by common descent from the ancestor, Israel, father of the twelve tribes. The closer the common ancestor to the generation of X and Y, the closer their relationship to each other. The degree of closeness determines their mutual obligations and responsibilities.

The idiom of descent or genealogy is itself a cultural construction, that is to say, one doesn't need to be related by blood to be genealogically related. It is a regular rule in patrilineal societies that women enter into their husband's lineage at marriage. At times in the Bible, we can see whole clans or villages changing their places in the genealogy because of a change of historical circumstances. For example, the clans or villages of Hetzron and Carmi are both sons of Reuben in some texts (Gen 46:9; Exod 6:14; cf. 1 Chr 5:3), but are elsewhere listed as sons of Judah (1 Chr 4:1). This shift in genealogical affiliation probably provides a glimpse of tribal history, as Reubenite clans were absorbed into Judah. Even foreign villages and clans could become Israelite and enter the genealogy. The foreign clan of Jerahmeel later became a clan of Judah, again reflecting the tribal expansion of Judah and the absorption of foreign clans into its lineage (cf. 1 Sam 27:10 and 1 Chr 2:9, 25). A group can change its status from outsider to insider by assuming a new social identity and entering the genealogy. One's place in the genealogy is a sign of cultural self-definition more than it is a sign of biological descent.

With the social function and historical fluidity of genealogies in mind, let us see how they are used in the Bible to mark the boundary between inside and outside, between Israel and the nations. In Genesis, these boundaries are fragile and contentious. The legal status of the first-born son to carry the main line of the genealogy is highly contested, most obviously between Jacob and Esau, but also between Sarah and Hagar (on behalf of their sons, Isaac and Ishmael), Perez and Zerah, Joseph and his brothers, and even Cain and Abel. Usually the younger son prevails and the older son is denigrated in some way, as if the first-born were unworthy of carrying the lineage that issues in the people Israel. In these lineage conflicts, the Israelite ancestors are extolled and the ancestors of its cultural neighbors disparaged. While the genealogical stories acknowledge Israel's relatedness to its neighbors, the relationship is colored by various stereotypes of the Other. Through a dialectic of structural opposition, Israel asserts in its genealogical stories that it is a righteous and

civilized people, in contrast to the foreigners who more often than not are seen as creatures of nature: wild, stupid, sexually licentious, or violent.

In the primeval narratives of Genesis 1–11, three peoples are singled out for genealogical derision: the Kenites, the Canaanites, and the Babylonians. Cain (originally *Qayn*) is clearly, by his distinctive name, the eponymous ancestor of the tribe of Kenites (originally *Qaynī*).[19] Cain, of course, is a fratricide whom God curses to wander without home or refuge (Gen 4:12). This is an attribution of a shameful, violent ancestral origin. The Israelites, in contrast, are descended from Adam and Eve's third and youngest son, Seth. The next people disparaged is the Canaanites, whose ancestor is Canaan. He is cursed for his father's sexual transgression—"Ham, Canaan's father, saw his father's nakedness"—and is consigned to servitude (Gen 9:20–27). Canaan's curse in this story is, as Rashi noted, a justification for God's decision to reassign the land of Canaan to the children of Israel. This too is a shameful origin for this foreign people and a warrant for Israelite domination. The third people disparaged in the primeval narratives is Babylon, whose city becomes a watchword of cultural arrogance and disaster (Gen 11:1–9). The Tower of Babel story deflates the cultural pretensions of Babylonian civilization. In all three of these ethnographic tales, a foreign people is colored with shameful origins.

In the patriarchal narratives of Genesis 12–50, the genealogical contrast of wild foreigners with the civilized precursors of Israel is both heightened and complicated. The three generations of the patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—each portray a different set of genealogical oppositions. In the first, Abraham's righteousness is contrasted with his nephew Lot's flaws. Lot's most egregious fault occurs in Genesis 19, when he offers his daughters to the lustful townsmen of Sodom in an attempt to protect his guests. In an apt and shameful turnabout, his daughters later seduce Lot, and they become pregnant and bear the ancestors of Moab and Ammon (Gen 19:30–38). Lot's incest with his daughters is a grievous sin, which stains the ancestry of the peoples of Moab and Ammon. Though Israel is related to its Transjordanian neighbors, and is at times on good terms with them, these peoples are denigrated by their ancestors' shameful sexual origins.

The next generation juxtaposes Ishmael, the son born of the slave woman Hagar, and Isaac, the son born of Abraham's wife, Sarah. Ishmael, who is cast out at Sarah's insistence, becomes the ancestor of the Arab peoples. Though an angel of God gives him the promise of a great nation, the angel also promises that "he will be a wild ass of a man, his hand against everyone, and everyone's hand against him" (Gen 16:12). Later Ishmael prospers as a hunter in the wilderness and marries an Egyptian woman (Gen 21:20–21). The story

of Ishmael gives a mixed portrait; he is blessed by God, but he ends up as a predator on the outskirts of civilization, violent as a wild ass and marrying a foreign woman. In terms of the story, Ishmael—and by implication his descendants—are less civilized than the line of his younger half-brother, Isaac.

It is illuminating to note how Islamic and Christian traditions later revise the structural opposition of Abraham's two sons in accord with their cultural and genealogical preferences. In post-Quranic Islamic tradition, Ishmael is exalted as the beloved son whom Abraham almost sacrifices, and Ishmael and Abraham together build the holy shrine of the Kaᶜba in Mecca.[20] In the New Testament, Paul identifies the child of the promise, Isaac, as the symbolic precursor of the Christians, and the slave's child, Ishmael, as the symbolic precursor of the Jews (Gal 4:22–31). In all three Abrahamic religions, the genealogical process of cultural self-definition is at work in the portrayal of Abraham's sons.

The third generation of the patriarchal lineage in Genesis contrasts Jacob, the younger son, with Esau, the firstborn. While Jacob is a smooth man—a term that applies both to his body and his deceptive strategems[21]—his brother Esau is hairy, a wild man like Ishmael, more at home in the wilderness than in human settlements. "When the boys grew up, Esau was a man skilled in hunting game, a man of the open country; but Jacob was a civilized [literally, "pure, whole"] man, dwelling in the tents" (Gen 25:27). Esau is a man of nature, in contrast to Jacob, the man of culture.[22] Esau's brutish simplicity makes him an easy mark for Jacob's wiles when he sells his birthright for a bowl of lentil soup (Gen 25:29–34). At the end of this tale, Esau doesn't even seem to realize what he has done: "He ate and he drank and he rose up and he walked away"—he is a man who thinks with his belly.[23] Because Jacob is the intelligent one—and is favored by his intelligent mother—he also tricks his father and obtains the patriarchal blessing and promise (Gen 27). Later he resourcefully wins from God the name Israel (Gen 32:29), sealing his identity as Israel's ancestor. In contrast, Esau is identified as the ancestor of Edom (*ʾĕdôm*) because he is unable to think of the correct name for the lentil soup, referring to it stupidly as "this red red stuff" (*hāʾādōm hāʾādōm hazzeh*; Gen 25:30). In these stories, the Edomites are collectively stereotyped by their simple and brutish ancestor.

In the processes of genealogical self-definition expressed in these stories, the foreign Other is generally described as, to varying degrees, uncivilized or immoral. One would expect that the hero of the Israelite patriline is, in contrast, civilized and just. Such is the case with Abraham versus Lot and perhaps Isaac versus Ishmael (though Isaac is not a major character). But the case of Jacob versus Esau is more complicated, for Jacob, while clearly civilized, is not wholly

moral. There is a slippage in the case of Israel's eponymous ancestor. Jacob is morally challenging—a man of culture, but not consistently presenting the best face of human culture. His wiles (and his mother's) win him the birthright and patriarchal blessing. But he pays for his trickery when Laban substitutes his first-born daughter Leah for the younger daughter Rachel on Jacob's wedding night (Gen 29:23). In this turnabout, the father tricks the son-in-law in a manner that mirrors the son's earlier trick of his own father. The older child is now substituted for the younger, and Laban justifies the deception in words heavy with literary irony: "It is not done in our place to give the younger before the first-born" (Gen 29:26). Later, in Genesis 37, Jacob's sons avenge themselves on their precocious younger brother, Joseph, and deceive their father by cleverly manipulating Joseph's special cloak. This trick also echoes Jacob's deception of his father, which involved wearing his brother's best clothes. Jacob pays the price for his tricks several times over, though he retains his status as the eponymous ancestor, Israel. Even Esau seems to grow in maturity by the end of the story (see Genesis 33), while Jacob is still a trickster in old age (see his deception of Joseph in Genesis 48), in spite of having grown wiser.

In the stories of Jacob/Israel, the cultural narcissism of genealogical self-definition is turned, at least in part, into a self-representation of impropriety and guilt. The complexities of the Jewish soul are foreshadowed by this ambiguous characterization. On the one hand, Jacob/Israel is the man of the promise and blessing, who has "striven with God and with men and has prevailed" (Gen 32:29). On the other hand, he suffers for his triumphs and pays a price for taking the name "Israel." Though he prevails, he also limps (Gen 32:32).

The Canaanite Matrix

The prophet Ezekiel, in a message of divine wrath against Israel, castigates her genealogical origins: "Your origins and birth are from the land of the Canaanites. Your father was an Amorite, and your mother was a Hittite" (Ezek 16:3). Formulated in the same idiom as the genealogical stories discussed above, this is an attribution of shameful origins, leading to the application of the proverb "Like mother, like daughter" to Israel's infidelity (Ezek 16:44). Although this genealogical insult is intended to inspire shame and guilt, it also seems to be a fairly accurate portrayal of Israel's origins. There is a deep ambivalence in Ezekiel's angry speech—even though there were marked continuities between Canaanite and Israelite culture, the principle of nontranslatability applies. Anything Canaanite is foreign and abominable in the prophet's eyes.

The extent of the Canaanite matrix of Israelite culture has become clearer over the last several decades. The twin turning points have been the archaeological finds discussed earlier, and the discovery of religious texts from the ancient city of Ugarit on the coast of modern Syria, beginning in the 1930s and continuing to the present day.[24] Ugarit was a flourishing Canaanite city-state in the Late Bronze Age (1500–1200 B.C.E.), and most of the texts come from this period. This is the period immediately prior to the rise of Israelite civilization farther to the south.

The texts from Ugarit are in a language closely related to Hebrew. They tell stories whose themes, diction, and characters are often familar from the Bible. For example, the following passage from the Ugaritic myth of Baal stands in close relation to a passage from the book of Isaiah written over half a millennium later:

> When you killed Lotan, the fleeing serpent,
> finished off the twisting serpent,
> the mighty one with seven heads,
> the heavens withered and drooped . . . (*CAT* 1.5.i.1–4)
>
> On that day, Yahweh will punish
> with his fierce, great, and mighty sword
> Leviathan, the fleeing serpent,
> Leviathan, the twisting serpent,
> he will slay the dragon of the sea. (Isa 27:1)

In this instance, as in many others, the Ugaritic and biblical texts draw on a common West Semitic cultural tradition. The monster Lotan/Leviathan (variants of the same name)[25] is destined to die at the hand of the great Divine Warrior, Baal at Ugarit and Yahweh in Israel. In Isaiah 27, this myth is projected into the future, when all the forces of chaos will be defeated, and God's rule will be established forever. The defeat of chaos at the dawn of time will recur at the dawn of the hoped-for new era.[26] In the comparison of these two passages, we can see plainly the continuities and the transformations of tradition in Canaan and Israel.

Israelite culture inherits and transforms not only the mythology of the Divine Warrior, but also the stories and traits of other figures of the Canaanite pantheon. Perhaps the most surprising survivals and transformations belong to the mythologies of El and Asherah, the father and mother of the Canaanite gods. In the Bible and in several recently discovered Hebrew inscriptions, we can see how aspects of these deities were woven deeply into Israelite conceptions of the divine.

El is the high god of the Canaanite pantheon at Ugarit. His name simply means "God."[27] El is described as wise and gracious; he is called "El, the kind and compassionate one" (*lṭpn ʾil dpʾid*). He is an elderly god with a gray beard and is depicted in reliefs and statuary seated on a royal throne. His image is comparable to the description of the God of Israel in Dan 7:9: "As I looked, thrones were set up, and the Ancient of Days sat down. His garment was white as snow, and the hair of his head was [white as] pure wool." In other Canaanite and Phoenician texts, El is called "creator of earth," just as the God of Israel is called "El most high, creator of heaven and earth" by Abraham (Gen 14:22).[28] El is the father of the gods, who are appropriately called the "Children of El" (*bn ʾil*), just as the subordinate deities or angels in the Bible are called the "Children (or Sons) of God (El)" (*bĕnê ʾēl, bĕnê ʾĕlōhîm*, and similarly). El lives on a mountain or, alternately, at the "source of the two seas." Similarly, the God of Israel dwells on a mountain (Sinai or Zion), and his divine garden ("Eden, the garden of God" on "the holy mountain of God" in Ezek 28:13–14) is the source of the four rivers (Gen 2:10). In name, character, and locale, Canaanite El and the God of Israel are closely affiliated.

El is also the "Father of Humans" (*ʾab ʾadm*) and "Creator of Creatures" (*bn bnwt*), and he blesses his favored worshipers by granting them sons when they lack heirs. The similarities to the biblical stories of the creation of Adam and the granting of sons to Abraham and the other patriarchs are apparent. The decrees of El, promulgated from his mountain home, also remind us of the laws that the God of Israel grants from his holy mountain. The Law at Sinai, in some respects, echoes old cultural memories of the wise decrees of El. Even the name "Israel" (*yiśrāʾēl*) seems originally to mean "El rules." The fact that Israel's God is often simply called "El," as for example in the titles *ʾēl ʿôlām*, "El the Ancient One" (Gen 21:33), or *ʾēl šadday*, "El the One of the Mountain" (Gen 17:1, etc.), underscores the continuity of divine traits shared by Canaanite El and the God of Israel.[29]

The mother of the gods in the Ugaritic texts is Asherah, whose name derives from the word for "trace, path, or place."[30] She is the "Creatress of the Gods" (*qnyt ʾilm*) and is probably referred to as the "Holy One" (*qdš*). As El's wife, she effectively appeals for his blessing on behalf of other gods. In the Baal myth, she approaches El for his permission to grant Baal a palace, using sweet and well-balanced words:

> Lady Asherah of the sea replied:
> "Your decree, O El, is wise,
> your wisdom is eternal,
> a fortunate life is your decree." (*CAT* 1.4.iv.40–43)

With such elegant poetic diction—note the interwoven sounds and sense of *tḥmk* ("your decree"), *ḥkm* ("wise"), and *ḥkmk* ("your wisdom")—El easily accedes to her request.

Asherah is also a beneficent goddess for her earthly worshipers. The wise King Kirta makes an oath to Asherah at one of her temples, promising great tribute if Asherah grants success to his quest for a wife.

> They arrived at the holy shrine of Asherah of Tyre,
> and of the goddess of Sidon.
> There the noble Kirta made a vow:
> "As Asherah of Tyre lives,
> and the goddess of Sidon,
> if I take Hurraya into my house
> if I bring the maiden to my court,
> I will give double her (weight?) in silver,
> triple her (weight?) in gold." (*CAT* 1.14.iv.34–43)

This passage shows that Asherah had local shrines and worshipers and that she was appealed to for her blessings, including matters of marriage and the accompanying expectation of offspring. Such matters seem appropriate for the wife of El and mother of the gods.

In the Bible, Asherah is known as a goddess who was imported into Israel from Phoenician culture (Phoenicia was a direct descendant of old Canaanite culture). The dread Queen Jezebel seems to have brought the "prophets of Asherah" into Israel from her Phoenician homeland (1 Kgs 18:19). The evil king Manasseh is said to have erected some sort of statue to Asherah in the Jerusalem Temple (2 Kgs 21:7), and there were special rooms in the Temple where women wove embroidered garments for this statue (2 Kgs 23:7).[31] The Queen Mother Maacah is also said to have made an "abominable thing" for Asherah (1 Kgs 15:13), which suggests some sort of statue or image. Interestingly, these references to the worship of Asherah are restricted to royal families, who are thereby marked as wicked and corrupt.[32]

Elsewhere in the Bible, Asherah (or asherah with small "a") is used as a word referring to a wooden pole or tree that is part of the cultic furniture of the local shrines in Israel.[33] This "asherah" is a common noun, not a personal name, and, perhaps curiously, has a masculine plural ending. It is not clear whether this asherah-object was conceived as a symbol of the goddess Asherah, or whether it had become somehow denatured as a holy symbol of the God of Israel. The prominence of holy trees in various foundation stories of local shrines—including Shechem ("the oak of the Teacher" in Gen 12:6, probably the same as "the oak in the sanctuary of Yahweh" in Josh 24:26), Beersheba

("a tamarisk tree," Gen 21:33), and Ophrah ("a terebinth tree," Judg 6:11)—suggests a diversity of Israelite interpretations of the symbolism of trees at shrines. In these texts, the sacred trees are an unproblematic part of ordinary Israelite worship. In Deuteronomy and other related texts (see ahead), the holy trees, asherahs, and related cultic objects are castigated as foreign abominations, along with the local shrines themselves.

The discovery of several Hebrew inscriptions from the eighth century B.C.E. that mention Asherah—or asherah—has highlighted the prominence of this goddess and/or holy object in ancient Israelite religion.[34] From a local shrine at Kuntillet ᶜAjrud, a stop on an ancient trade route in the northern Sinai, come the following inscriptions on pots and plaster, some quite fragmentary:[35]

1. "I bless you by Yahweh of Samaria and by his asherah"
2. ". . . by Yahweh of Teman and by his asherah . . . and may Yahweh grant him his desire"
3. "I bless you by Yahweh of Teman and by his asherah. May he bless you, protect you, and be with my lord"
4. "[let them] say(?), 'By Yahweh of Teman and by his asherah. . . . Do good, O Yahweh.' "

Another inscription from the same general period, from a rock tomb at Khirbet el-Qom, also mentions Asherah:[36]

5. "May Uriah be blessed by Yahweh, my protector, and by his asherah. Deliver him . . ."

These inscriptions share the same general blessing formulae that we find in the Bible and other Hebrew inscriptions, with the notable addition of the appeal to "his asherah" (אשרתה). But who or what is "his asherah"? There are several possible ways to read this reference, and none is entirely satisfactory.

The simplest way to construe "his asherah" is as a reference to the wooden pole or tree that was part of a shrine. This would cohere with the references to the local cults of Yahweh—"Yahweh of Samaria" (the capital city of the northern kingdom), and "Yahweh of Teman" (probably a reference to the region of Kuntillet ᶜAjrud—תמן means "south"). Each of these local shrines plausibly had an asherah-object or sacred tree beside its altar. This object is perhaps called upon here as an aspect of the sacred presence of Yahweh that is manifested in these places. The "asherah," in this reading, is a symbol of Yahweh's presence, not a separate deity. This coheres with the requests that follow in four of the five blessings, in which it is Yahweh alone who acts: (2) "may Yahweh grant him his desire"; (3) "May he bless you, protect you, and be with

my lord"; (4) "Do good, O Yahweh"; (5) "Deliver him." All of these verbs are in the masculine singular, clearly referring to Yahweh.

A slightly more difficult construal is to read "his Asherah" as the goddess Asherah, appealed to in these blessings as a distinctive deity and object of worship. In this reading, Asherah is Yahweh's wife, just as she was El's wife in Canaanite religion. The chief problem for this reading is that the pronominal suffix, "his," is not used for proper names in classical Hebrew. To see the goddess clearly in these blessings requires that the blessing formula be ungrammatical, which seems unlikely. A way around this grammatical objection is to read "asherah" as a generic word for "goddess," which is plausible but not elsewhere attested.

A third way to read this reference combines the meanings of the asherah-object and the goddess Asherah. The reference may be to the asherah-object, but the object may have been generally understood to be a symbol of the goddess. In this reading, the goddess is implicit in the object. There can be no grammatical objection to this reading, but it still encounters some difficulty in the absence of the goddess in the invocations following, which are limited to the masculine singular, "may *he* bless you, protect you," and so on. One way out of this difficulty would be to see Asherah as a mediating deity between the worshiper and Yahweh, who is the effective bestower of blessing.

We still do not possess a conclusive understanding of these blessings "by Yahweh and his asherah." One way or another, however, it seems to shed further light on the Canaanite matrix of Israelite religion. Matrix literally means "womb," from the Latin word for "mother." Perhaps in the legacy of Asherah in Israelite religion, we see the trace of the Mother of the Gods in the worship of Yahweh, who, though male, is the one who grants the "blessing of breasts and womb" (Gen 49:25). Asherah's blessing persists in some measure in the character of this God and his A/asherah.

Ritual Boundaries: The Body, Food, Time

Israelite religion and culture were not monolithic. There were, to borrow William James's phrase, varieties of religious experience in ancient Israel.[37] Recent scholarship has brought to light regional, chronological, and sociological differences in religious practices and beliefs. One of the primary sociological differences is that between family religion and state religion, which at times clashed in the turmoil and social upheavals of Israelite history.[38] Family religion centered on marriage, offspring, and good fortune—as exemplified in the family stories of the patriarchs and others. State religion often centered on national

wars and the ideologies of kings—as exemplified in many of the narratives of Judges, Samuel, and Kings.

In the differences between the one religion and the other, we find the natural locations of the legacies of El, the gracious god of the fathers, and Baal, the Divine Warrior. In the patriarchal stories, God is a beneficent divine patriarch. In the national battles of the Exodus and Conquest, he is a warrior and king. For example, the patriarch Jacob blesses his son Joseph by "the God of your fathers, who helps you, the God of the mountain [literally, 'El, the One of the Mountain'], who blesses you" (Gen 49:25).[39] But in the context of great national events, as after God's victory at the Red Sea, the divine portrayal is in a different register: "Yahweh is a warrior" who "will rule forever and ever" (Exod 15:3, 18). The two divine 'types'—beneficent patriarch and warrior-king—emerge in these differing social contexts.

Although the varying internal boundaries in Israelite religion and culture suggest a real cultural pluralism, there were also external boundaries that demarcated, more or less clearly, where Israelite culture began and ended. These external boundaries determined whether one was or wasn't an Israelite. One such common cultural ground was, of course, language, though there is evidence of dialectal variation within Hebrew.[40] Another source of shared identity was the recitation of traditional stories of the past, such as the Exodus story discussed previously. A third source was the web of genealogies, in which one's family and clan were explicitly related to everyone else in the lineages of Israel. And fourth was the body of shared rituals. In the practices of everyday life, Israelites enacted their cultural identity in symbolic actions, whether offering animal sacrifice at local shrines, making pilgrimages on the major festivals, or undergoing rites of healing or passage.

A range of ritual practices served to mark the implicit boundaries of cultural identity. Some of these were identical in origin to the practices of neighboring peoples, but over time they came to be understood, by insiders and outsiders, as distinctively Israelite. Among these many acts, three that were—and still are—singled out as distinctive are circumcision, food laws, and the observation of the Sabbath. The domains of these practices—the body, food, and time—are exemplary for showing the effective symbolism of rituals as markers of cultural boundaries.

The Body

In ancient Israel, a patrilineal society, the male body was ritually marked by circumcision, called a "sign of the covenant" (Gen 17:11).[41] By so marking the male organ of procreation, each Israelite family was covered with a sacred sign.

Various kinds of symbolism—patrilineal descent, sexual fertility, male initiation, cleansing of birth impurity, and dedication to God—are intermingled in this mark. It has been elegantly described as "the fruitful cut."[42]

For this bodily mark to serve as a cultural boundary, there must be contrasting male bodies which lack it—the uncircumcised. Curiously, the evidence indicates that most of the males in Israel's immediate vicinity were also marked by circumcision. The prophet Jeremiah informs us that many of the peoples of the ancient Near East practiced circumcision, including "Egypt, Judah, Edom, the Ammonites, Moab, and all the desert dwellers who clip the corners of their hair" (Jer 9:25). Textual and pictorial evidence from outside the Bible also indicate that the practice went back thousands of years.[43] The only males among Israel's immediate neighbors that lacked this mark were newcomers—the Philistines.

The Philistines were peoples from the Greek Aegean region who invaded and settled in the eastern Mediterranean shortly after 1200 B.C.E., precisely the period of the cultural formation of Israel in the highlands of southern Canaan.[44] The Philistines, with their superior technology, became the dominant political and military force of the region, as recalled in the stories of Samson, Saul, and David. This was probably the major impetus in the transformation of Israel from a tribal society to a unified kingship with a permanent standing army. The Philistines were the dominant foreign Other in this crucial period, and their male bodies were uncircumcised.

In the biblical stories about this period, the term "uncircumcised" is often used as a synonym for "Philistine" (e.g., Judg 15:18; 1 Sam 14:6, 31:4). In David's lament over Saul and Jonathan, killed in battle against the Philistine army, he cries:

> Do not tell it in Gath
>   Do not recount it in the streets of Ashkelon,
> Lest the daughters of the Philistines rejoice,
>   Lest the daughters of the uncircumcised exult. (2 Sam 1:20)

It is interesting to note in this regard that the bride-price that Saul had earlier requested of David was a hundred Philistine foreskins (1 Sam 18:25). By this means Saul not only managed to endanger David's life, but also to highlight the sign of the Philistines' abominable otherness.

It appears that the origin of circumcision as a cultural boundary of the Jews was facilitated by the dangerous presence of the uncircumcised Philistines.[45] Uncircumcision as a sign of the dangerous and dominant Other was later associated with the Assyrians and Babylonians, and later still the Greeks. Perhaps in response to the hegemony of these foreign powers, ancient Israel

developed the belief that the uncircumcised had a particularly gloomy place reserved for them in Sheol, the underworld, alongside the unburied (Ezek 28: 10, 31:18, 32:19–31). To have a foreskin was to be barbarous, cruel, and doomed to the "death of the uncircumcised" (מותי ערלים).[46]

Curiously, the cultural boundaries drawn by this opposition between circumcised and uncircumcised—involving the contrast of civilization versus barbarism—are in tension with those constructed in the genealogical stories already discussed. Circumcision was a shared cultural trait of other neighboring peoples (Ammonites, Moabites, Edomites, Phoenicians, Arameans, etc.), who were thus grouped on the inside of this boundary. A kinship with these peoples as similarly circumcised and (therefore) civilized is implicit.

By this logic a foreign people could become kin of the Israelites on the condition of their being circumcised. So Jacob's sons say to the Hivites of Shechem: "Only on this condition will we agree with you (to marry our sister), if you become like us, to have every male among you circumcised" (Gen 34: 15). Jacob's sons don't intend to go through with the bargain, but their pledge seems to show how the rite worked as a cultural boundary in matters of kinship. To be circumcised—or to be a daughter of a circumcised father—is to be a potential Israelite. So David can marry an Aramean princess (2 Sam 3:3); Solomon can wed an Egyptian princess (1 Kgs 3:1) along with Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Phoenician, and Hittite women (1 Kgs 11:1); Ahab marries the Phoenician Jezebel (1 Kgs 16:31); and Chilion marries the Moabite Ruth (Ruth 1:4)—they are all eligible brides on account of their male kin's circumcision. This ritual logic was apparently later overruled by the postexilic ban on intermarriage with "the peoples of the land" (Ezra 9–10; Neh 10:31, 13:23–27). In this revision of custom, national boundaries replaced the older ritual boundaries. Or to be more precise, the nation or ethnos replaced the tribal system as the locus for kinship relations.[47]

The expansive cultural boundaries of circumcision seem to be restricted to Israel in God's covenant with Abraham in Genesis 17, in which circumcision is a sign of the covenant. This is a Priestly text, probably written around the sixth century B.C.E. This mark, which previously was a general sign of West Semitic culture, crystallized into one of the most prominent boundary markers of Jewish identity. At some time during the Second Temple period, the rite became obsolete in other West Semitic cultures.[48] By this fruitful cut, the identity of the Jewish male body—and the Jewish social body—came to be distinguished from the bodies of other cultures.[49]

Food

Another daily reminder of cultural identity is food. Ethnic foodways develop in varying degrees in different cultures, but food is always a sign of home—certainly in Judaism. What one eats and with whom one shares food are visible expressions of social bonds and boundaries. The biblical food laws are, like circumcision, reminders of God's covenant with Israel. The theological issue is holiness, as God commands in the conclusion to the food laws in Leviticus: "You shall be holy, for I am holy" (Lev 11:45). To be holy with respect to food means to eat what is allowed and to abstain from what is prohibited. As the anthropologist Mary Douglas demonstrated in her classic essay, "The Abominations of Leviticus," the biblical food laws have to do with boundaries—cultural, theological, and conceptual.[50]

The earliest trace of these food laws in Israelite material culture comes from the era of Philistine hegemony, the same period when circumcision seems to have become an ethnic boundary marker. Recent archaeological excavations of early Israelite and Philistine sites show a remarkable contrast in the presence and absence of pig bones. The archaeologist Lawrence Stager reports that "In the highland villages [of early Israel] of the Iron I period, the bones of pigs are rare or completely absent, but in Philistia they constitute a significant proportion of excavated faunal remains."[51] This contrast is not explicable on ecological grounds, but rather rests on cultural ones. The archaeological evidence indicates that pig production was scarce in West Semitic culture,[52] but in Mycenaean Greek culture pigs were a valued source of meat. The Philistine preference for pork was apparently imported from their Aegean homeland. It was arguably the catalyst for the explicit avoidance of this food in early Israelite culture.[53]

With this dietary law, as with the rite of circumcision, a general West Semitic practice crystallized into a mark of Israelite cultural identity. The dangerous presence of the Philistines was the foil for the formation of a "counter-identity" in Israel; a traditional foodway became transformed into a theological and cultural affirmation. Holiness was endangered by taking pork into the Israelite body, just as Philistine culture was a threat to the wholeness of the Israelite social body. The ritual boundaries of the Israelite meal celebrated and maintained the boundaries of society.

Time

The way that time is measured is another mark of cultural boundaries and group authority. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam each have different religious

calendars, counting time from different foundational events (creation, the birth of Christ, the exodus from Mecca). In biblical writings, time is marked according to key moments such as the Exodus or the reigns of Israelite kings. In the later era of the Second Temple, the Essenes proclaimed their cultural boundaries by advocating a calendar based on the solar year, in contrast to the traditional lunar (or lunisolar) calendar.[54] The high priest of Jerusalem even seems to have journeyed to Qumran to discipline the wayward community for deviating from the official calendar. Since then, Jewish groups and authorities have continued to vie over calendrical issues—the beginning of the day, the times and durations of festivals, intercalation, etc.

One of the distinctive ritual marks in biblical time is the Sabbath. It is, like circumcision, a "sign of the covenant" (Exod 31:12–17), and like the food laws, it is a matter of holiness. God commands: "You shall keep the Sabbath, for it is holy to you" (Exod 31:14, similarly Exod 20:8–11). Just as God rested on the seventh day of creation, Israel shall rest every seventh day. Time becomes sacred, periodically, in this fruitful temporal cut.

The institution of the Sabbath is an Israelite innovation, as is the division of time into weeks.[55] It is impossible to tell when this system was invented, but a Hebrew inscription of the seventh century mentions the Sabbath,[56] and it is prominent in writings of the eighth century prophets.[57] It is plausible that such a mark of temporal distinctiveness—involving cultural and religious difference—derived from an early era of Israelite culture, perhaps the same formative period when circumcision and food laws began to be ritual identity markers. At minimum we can say that the Sabbath was an important pre-exilic institution.[58]

The divisions of time, along with demarcations in foodways and the body, have long marked the external boundaries of the Jewish body politic. In ancient Israel, these were part of the growing system of ritual practices that served to display the inclusions and exclusions of Israelite cultural identity. Such clear external boundaries have long provided a protective cover for the plurality of religious experience within Judaism.

Revisionism and Tradition

Ancient Israel shared many cultural features with its neighbors in the Near East. In matters of ethics, law, architecture, medicine, poetry, theology, and ritual, Israel belonged to a family of West Semitic cultures.[59] Differences there were, and these were made emblematic of a perception of cultural uniqueness, of a people dwelling apart. Yet, as we have seen, differences also existed within

Israelite culture. Over time, some of these internal differences were felt by some to be problematic. Certain biblical authors came to reject some of the ancient customary features of Israelite religion, labeling them as foreign, and therefore corrupt and irreligious. Native practice was reinterpreted as a foreign assault on Israel's cultural boundaries, following the idiom of the dangerous and seductive Other.

During the eighth to sixth centuries B.C.E., a powerful revisionist movement developed among various prophets, priests, and sages. The result was a far-reaching upheaval in the boundaries and structures of Jewish identity. An argument began that has not yet ceased on what Judaism is, and who is an authentic Jew.

The first such critic known to us is Hosea, who prophesied in the Northern Kingdom in the mid-eighth century B.C.E. He abhorred many of the religious practices, institutions, and beliefs of his day. Prominent among these were the major northern shrines at Gilgal and Bethel (which he mockingly called Beth-Aven, "house of wickedness"):

> Do not come to Gilgal,
> and do not go up to Beth-Aven,
> and do not swear: "As Yahweh lives." (Hos 4:15)

These shrines and their cultic practices—including sacrifices[60] and oaths—were illegitimate in Hosea's eyes. He also objected to the multiplicity of local religious shrines, which typically featured sacrificial altars, standing stones, and holy trees or asherah-objects. He associates the worship at these shrines with illicit sex and promiscuity.

> On the mountaintops they make sacrifices,
> and on the hills they burn offerings;
> Beneath oaks, poplars, and terebinths
> whose shade is good.
> That is why their daughters have illicit sex,
> and their daughter-in-laws commit adultery. . . .
> And they too turn aside with prostitutes,
> and sacrifice with sacred whores.[61] (Hos 4:13–14)

The equation of religious and sexual misconduct provides the background for the cautionary story of Hosea's marriage to a prostitute (Hosea 1 and 3) and the metaphor of Yahweh's marriage to promiscuous Israel (Hosea 2).[62] The language of sexual misconduct—whether historically accurate or not—gives Hosea a broad brush to paint Israel's depravity.[63]

But when we look at earlier portraits of Israelite religious practice, the local

Phoenician sacred place with (l.–r.) flaming incense altar, standing stones, and tree. The inscription reads "ambrosial stones." Tyrian coin, third cent. C.E. From G. F. Hill, *Catalogue of the Greek Coins of Phoenicia*. London: British Museum, 1910. Pl. 33.14; illustration from A. B. Cook, *Zeus: A Study in Ancient Religion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1940. Vol. 3/2, 980, fig. 785.

shrines are depicted as perfectly orthodox and innocuous. For example, Abram's first act when he enters the Promised Land is to build such a shrine:

> Abram traveled across the land to the site of Shechem, to the Oak of the Teacher. The Canaanites were then in the land. And Yahweh appeared to Abram and said, "To your descendants I will give this land." And he built there an altar to Yahweh, who had appeared to him there. (Gen 12:6–7)

Abram next builds an altar on a hill between Bethel and Ai, and he prays to Yahweh there (Gen 12:8). Later Yahweh appears to Jacob at Bethel, and Jacob makes a vow and erects a standing stone to mark it as a holy site: "And this rock, which I have set up as a standing stone, will be a temple [literally "house"] of God (*bêt ʾĕlōhîm*)" (Gen 28:21). From these and many other examples, we can see that these were normal shrines in the Yahwistic cult. Why should Hosea disparage them with such a blanket denunciation?

While there were probably many factors at play in the prophet's rejection of the legitimacy of the local shrines, one was likely the fact that these were cultic features shared with Israel's neighbors. Local shrines with altars, standing stones, and trees were a common phenomenon in West Semitic culture, probably going back to the Stone Age.[64] Phoenician coins clearly depict the iconography of such shrines (figure 1). One of Hosea's objections is that the shrines were devoted to "Baal" (or "the Baals"), even though he admits that the sacrifices and oaths were offered to Yahweh.[65] The elision of the local shrines with "the Baals" seems, at least in part, to follow the same logic of nontranslatability that we saw in the castigation of the seer Balaam. A trait that

is shared with non-Israelites is damned as foreign and illicit and is redescribed as conducing to illicit sex.

Baruch Halpern has described this phenonmenon, which Hosea begins and which bears fruit in Deuteronomy and other biblical books, as "the elite redefinition of traditional culture."[66] The old religious practices and ideas—which shared features with neighboring cultures—were derided as alien, foreign, and corrupting. The new religious elite developed a critique that at times extended to all traditional forms of religious ritual, setting in its place the primacy of individual ethics and interior piety. This critique, when implemented following the reforms of Kings Hezekiah and Josiah, transformed the local aspect of Israelite religion from family religion to personal, interior devotion.[67] Hosea captures the direction of this movement by posing ritual and ethics as antithetical, a contrast that would have seemed strange and radical to most Israelites:[68]

> For I desire love, not sacrifices,
> knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings. (Hos 6:6)

The old practices are empty, and inner religion becomes ascendant. This gives rise to Jeremiah's later formulation of the "new covenant," which is purely interior: "I will put my teaching within them, and I will write it in their hearts, so that I will be their God, and they will be my people" (Jer 31:32).

According to the biblical accounts, the elimination of the local shrines was adopted as public policy by Kings Hezekiah and Josiah (2 Kings 18 and 23).[69] Among the circumstances that made possible the rejection of these shrines and the uprooting of traditional religious practice was the devastation wrought by the Assyrians in the Judean countryside in the campaign of 701 B.C.E.[70] With only Jerusalem left, the decision to abolish local shrines and transform kin-based religion was perhaps inevitable—the Assyrian armies had already done the work of demolition. In the wake of this calamity, Jerusalem and its Temple became the primary locus of Israelite religion.

More than any other biblical book, Deuteronomy (seventh–sixth centuries B.C.E.) defines the new course of Judaism as a religion of interior choice and commitment.[71] The object is to love God and to obey the law that God has planted in our hearts. Priests, prophets, and other religious intermediaries are rarely mentioned; rituals are mere reminders of God's gracious laws. God is transcendent and One, not a multiplicity of local phenomenon, as might be gathered by the multiplicity of shrines (note the local divine titles "Yahweh of Samaria" and "Yahweh of Teman" discussed previously).[72] These emphases of Deuteronomy are aptly captured by the Shema:

> Hear, O Israel, Yahweh our God, Yahweh is One. You shall love Yahweh, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might. These things that I command you today shall be upon your hearts. You shall repeat them to your children, and you shall speak of them when you sit in your house, when you walk on the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. (Deut 6:4–7)

This is classic Jewish spirituality, nurtured by Deuteronomy and transmitted through the centuries.

The obverse side of this interior spirituality is the condemnation of the old shrines as foreign and corrupting, inevitably leading to sex with foreigners.[73] Rather than be seduced by foreign culture, Moses in Deuteronomy commands the Israelites to destroy it:

> This is what you shall do to them: pull down their altars, break their standing stones, cut up their wooden pillars [asherahs], and burn their idols in fire. For you are a holy people to Yahweh your God. Yahweh your God has chosen you to be his precious people, over all the peoples on the face of the earth. (Deut 7:5–6)

The language of cultural distinctiveness is here joined to the alienation of native tradition. The local shrines are now defined as foreign Canaanite snares, on the far side of Israelite identity. Because Israel is different, it must spurn the practices of the nations. So the old-time religion became stigmatized as the foreign Other. Only Jerusalem, "the site that Yahweh your God will choose" (Deut 12:5, cf. 1 Kgs 8:16), is hallowed as the place of God's true name.

Deuteronomy's revisionism ushers in a new Jewish theology and identity. God is transcendent, uncontained by heaven and earth, having no shape or form, "for you saw no form when Yahweh spoke to you on Horeb out of the fire" (Deut 4:15). He demands that Israel love and obey him, each by his or her free choice: "choose life . . . by loving Yahweh your God" (Deut 30:19–20). Wherever one is—whether in Jerusalem or not—God is there: "If you look there for Yahweh your God, you will find Him, if you seek with all your heart and soul" (Deut 4:29). Yahweh's law, which is wise and perfect, exists within the individual: "It is not too wonderful for you or too distant . . . but the word is very close to you, it is in your mouth and your heart, to do it" (Deut 30:14). And as God is wise and profound, so is his people, as the nations—obtuse no more—proclaim: "This great nation is indeed a wise and profound people" (Deut 4:6). Thus do the nations add their assent to the revision of the traditional

structures of Judaism. For a brief moment, the foreign nations, like the early portrayal of Balaam, are truthful seers of Israel's wisdom.

The *way* that Deuteronomy revises Jewish tradition is also fraught with significance. The book is presented as Moses' farewell discourse to Israel, in which he recounts the instructions that God gave to him at Mount Horeb.[74] Moses recalls that God said to him: "As for you, stand here before me so that I may tell you all the commands, the laws, and the statutes that you will teach them" (Deut 5:28). Forty years later on the threshold of the Promised Land, Moses finally teaches the Israelites "all that Yahweh had commanded him concerning them" (Deut 1:3) at the holy mountain. By means of this narrative frame, the book of Deuteronomy authorizes its version of Israelite laws and traditions as תורה מסיני, "Torah from Sinai," to use the later rabbinic term (though it is "Torah from Horeb" in this case). Deuteronomy begins a process that will become central in rabbinic Judaism, that is, attributing all revisions and interpretations of biblical law and religion to the original revelation at Sinai.[75]

Deuteronomy makes interpretation of the law a fundamental way of constructing Jewish culture, and it does so by placing its interpretation in the foundational setting of God's revelation at the holy mountain. In this process, the Torah becomes an interpreted artifact, with the chain of Mosaically authorized interpretations stretching to the horizon. A later rabbi drew out some of the more extravagant consequences of this idea: "Torah, Mishnah, Talmud, and Aggadah—indeed, even the comments some bright student will one day make to his teacher—were already given to Moses on Mount Sinai."[76] All interpretation is always already there in the initial revelation at Sinai. From the precedent of Deuteronomy, interpretation has become both essential and interminable in Jewish culture. Every new boundary or relationship, every freshly redrawn inclusion or exclusion, is already implicit in God's original discourse, according to this ancient hermeneutical key. As a fascinating text from the Talmud puts it: "What is Torah? The interpretation [literally, 'midrash'] of Torah" (b. Qiddušin 49a–b). Revision has come home to roost.

Neighbors and Fences

Robert Frost famously observed that "good fences make good neighbors." A clear sense of the differences between oneself and others can conduce to a true neighborly relationship. But fences are often barbed, and a moral difference tends to inhere in the separation of inside from outside. Such is the case in many of the instances of genealogical, ritual, narrative, and revisionist self-

definition in ancient Israel. Moral claims are often asserted in the differentiation of the collective self from the Other, Israel from the nations.

Some biblical writings protested against this process of drawing the boundaries so that Israel is, by definition, on the side of good and the nations on the side of evil. They pointedly confused and problematized these simple moral boundaries, providing a legacy of cultural self-critique within Judaism. I have mentioned previously the stories of foreign women—Tamar, Rahab, Jael, and Ruth—who are, as Judah says, "more righteous than I" (Gen 38:26). The book of Job presents a uniquely righteous man who is a foreigner (from "the land of Uz").[77] Job, like Abraham, argues with God about issues of morality—though the outcome is more ambiguous than in Abraham's case. Most important, the classical prophets also tended to criticize the ethnocentric claims of Israel. Amos warns:

> Are you not like the children of the Cushites to me, O children of Israel, declares Yahweh? Did I not bring Israel out of the land of Egypt, and the Philistines from Caphtor, and Aram from Kir? (Amos 9:7)

This universalizing tendency offset the ethnocentrism implicit in a "chosen people" and created the potential for a powerful cultural critique, one of the great legacies of the biblical prophets.[78] The prophetic writings are not fond of the cultural fences that divide neighbor from neighbor.

The moral problem of nationalism and ethnic boundaries is most directly addressed in the book of Jonah, in which the reluctant prophet is angry and despondent when Yahweh forgives the people of Nineveh.

> This seemed like a great evil to Jonah, and he was very angry. He prayed to Yahweh, saying, "O Yahweh, isn't this what I said when I was in my own land, and why I earlier fled to Tarshish? For I know that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger, abundant in kindness, and renouncing evil. Now, Yahweh, take my life from me, for I would rather die than live." (Jonah 4:1–2)

In the end Yahweh teaches Jonah his lesson, that the nations are precious in God's eyes, and cultural narcissism is irrational and immoral. Notably, in view of the prominence of humor in later Jewish self-critique, God accomplishes this with a dash of humor. God's final comment—and the last word in the book—refers to the "many cattle" (Jonah 4:11), who too had fasted and worn sackcloth alongside the Ninevites (Jonah 3:7–8).[79] The comic image of penitent cows drives home the point that Israel has no intrinsically superior claim to God's love than the other nations. Or even their cows.

Biblical Israel shows many faces in its relations with its neighbors and fences in the ancient Near East. It is a member of a larger cultural family, but a self-consciously unique member of that family. It constructed its self-image out of the rich traditions of prior ideologies, narratives, and rituals, but it made something new out of the old worlds.[80] One of the leitmotifs in modern biblical scholarship has been the recovery of the cultural context of ancient Israel, allowing us the opportunity to read the biblical writings anew. When read in the context of the ancient Near East, the Bible shows itself to be more complex, variegated, and even self-contradictory than we knew before. Moral and philosophical issues are debated in this book and often not settled. Cultural identities are constructed in one part, only to be deconstructed in another. A culturally and historically alive Bible may be unsettling to some, for whom its meanings require the stable sediment of tradition. But tradition is itself unstable, and interpretation goes on, without end.