

GOD

To these questions about the pre-history of religion, however, the Biblical sources furnish few or no answers directly. Only a small proportion of them attained their present form much before 1000 a.c. As we go back before this time the tradition becomes gradually thinner and for the ancestors of Israel before 1750 or so it has become so lacking in detail and circumstantiality as to make the religious history before this time quite obscure. There is no sign in the OT of any consciousness of a pre-theistic stage, of a time when gods were not yet known, and the texts depict their God as having relations with man from the beginning of history. The question which they do discuss to some extent is not whether He was really a God, but by what name He was known.

In a number of stories and traditions it is possible to suspect or detect a pre-history of the story, which, relating earlier to an older Palestinian deity, has in the course of time been taken over and transferred to the God of the Israelite faith. This is a different matter, however, from a pre-history of the idea of God as such, and will be taken up later. In general, however, and as a point of method, it may be said here that in an article of this type the first purpose will be to explain the story in its Israelite form and not the story in another form which it may have had before; but the previous form will be specially relevant wherever it is needed to explain the peculiarities of the later—but for which peculiarities, it may be added, the existence of a previous form might not have been detectable.

4. Names of God in the OT.—For convenience we may here gather the more important Divine names of the Hebrew OT; some of the problems of their use must wait for treatment later.

(a) *El*.—This is fairly commonly taken to mean 'power' or 'the strong one,' of a Hebrew phrase 'it is in the power (*el*) of my hand to . . .' (e.g. Gn 31²⁹). But it is noticeable that this word and the following (viz. *'Elohim*) are both closely similar to common Semitic deictic elements used in demonstratives and similar particles, so that they may go back to a sense like 'that one' or 'that one there.' This would not necessarily exclude some connexion with *'el* 'power.'

In any case we find *'el* and its cognates as a general Semitic term for a god, and the plural *ilān* 'the gods' is frequent in Akkadian. On the other hand we find *El* as the name of a particular deity, and that on Canaanite soil in the Ugaritic literature, where *El* occupies a senior and venerable position among the gods, but is hardly the principal actor in the myths which we possess.

In the OT we may classify usage threefold: (1) *El* is used for 'God,' i.e. the God of Israel, and occasionally for some other god, e.g. Is 44¹⁷, and the plural for 'the gods,' as Ex 15¹¹. The word is generally poetical. (2) In the compound names or titles associated especially with the appearances to the patriarchs at holy places, e.g. *El Shaddai*, Gn 17¹ (RSV 'God Almighty'), *El Roi*, Gn 16¹³ (RSV 'a God of seeing'). In these there is a fair probability that the original reference is to the particular deity *El* or to special local deities whose designations include his name, and that later the names were taken to refer to the God of Israel. (3) The use in proper names like *Eliakim* 'May *'el* raise up' or *Ezekiel* 'May *'el* strengthen.' Though it is possible to argue here for an original reference to the proper name *El* (e.g. J. Gray, *Legacy of Canaan*, 1957, p. 120), it would seem better to think of a general reference, 'the god,' i.e. the god of this tribe or family, on the analogy of other theophoric elements such as 'the father' or 'the brother.'

(b) *Elohim*, the ordinary Hebrew word for God. For derivation see above under *El*. The word has a plural form, and the singular form *'Eloah* is found in Job frequently and occasionally elsewhere. In syntax the normal plural form is treated as singular for congruence with verbs and adjectives, with few exceptions, where the sense is 'God'; when used of other deities than the God of Israel, as in the phrase 'other gods' it is

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commonly plural in sense and syntactically treated as such.

The plural form has always excited great curiosity. It should not be treated as a discernment of a plurality within the being of God, and has developed rather from the usage of emphasizing the importance of one god by seeming to concentrate within Him the being of all the gods. So we already find in Akkadian the plural *ilān* 'gods' in the Tell-Amarna letters with a singular verb, meaning 'the deity,' and in the same letters when a man writes to Pharaoh as 'my lord, my gods and the sun' he is not seeing Pharaoh as a plurality but regarding him as comprehending all deity in himself. The usage does not imply a monotheism but a desire to generalize in the whole divine realm or to concentrate emphasis upon a particular god. But the widespread usage in Hebrew of this plural form (far exceeding the frequency in other Semitic languages) was almost certainly encouraged by the belief in the Israelite God as the only one of significance in Israel and therefore as the sum and total of deity.

There are a few places where we may have to think of *Elohim* as a realm or class of divine or superhuman beings; these beings are sometimes called 'sons of *'Elohim*' or 'sons of gods,' the word 'son' indicating less physical paternity than membership of a group. In Pt 8¹, for example, man is made a little less than *'Elohim*, and the comparison may be not with God but with the divine beings as a class. The Greek text recognized this by interpreting as 'a little less than the angels,' so He 2⁷.

(c) *Yahweh*, usually translated into English as 'the Lord.' This is a personal proper name, a fact rather obscured by the usual translation. The Jews in later times ceased to pronounce the name, and used in its place substitutes, such as *Adonai* ('My Lord'), or 'The Name.' The sacred name is sometimes called the Tetragrammaton, consisting in the Hebrew consonantal sequence of the four letters YHWH. The pronunciation *Jehovah* has no authority at all and appeared only in late medieval times; it is an attempt to vocalize the Tetragrammaton using the vowels written under it by the scribes, which vowels however were never intended to be combined with the four consonants of this word. That the pronunciation in ancient times was *Yahweh* is concluded from transcriptions in the early Christian Fathers.

In personal names, however, we find at the end of the name *Yahu* or *Yah*, e.g. *Azariah* (*'azaryāh* or *'azaryāh*, *Yahweh* has helped) and at the beginning of the name *Yebo-*, e.g. *Jehoiakim* (*y'hō-yākim*, *May Yahweh raise up*). The form *Yah* (see *JAM*) occasionally occurs alone, and frequently in the phrase *Hallelujah*, 'Praise ye *Yahweh*.' Forms of the *Yahu* type are attested from Assyrian texts and from the Elephantine papyri of about 400 a.c.

The problem has been much discussed (a) what was the meaning of the name; (b) whether the earliest form was *Yahweh* or *Yahu*, the two questions being very much interdependent. Ex 31⁴ gives what is intended as an interpretation of the name in the words 'I am who I am' (RSV) or rather 'I will be as I will be': in any case connecting the name with the verb 'to be'. The form *Yahu* could perhaps be explained as an abbreviation of *Yahweh*, but has often been taken to be a primitive cultic cry, *yā-hā* 'oh he.' It is not impossible that this latter explanation should be reconciled with the interpretation from the verb 'to be,' since it is possible to regard this verb (*hāwāh*, *hāyāh*) as a verbalized form related to the old Semitic deictic pronoun (*hāwa*, Heb. *hā*)—cf. Rundgren, *Über Bildungen mit h- und w-Demonstrativen im Semitischen*, 1955, p. 154. The writer would prefer then to take it as connected with the verb 'to be' in the sense 'he is, he shows himself to be' and also with an old cultic cry in the sense 'oh he'—in English we should almost have to say 'oh thou.' It should be added that the interpretation of this name is very controversial among scholars, and numerous,