

Chapter 3

Ideas, Images and Early Works

(13th to 11th centuries BCE)

‘Your origin and your birth were in the land of the Canaanites.’
(Ezekiel 15:2)

Many of the earliest stories and ideas that were eventually to form parts of the Hebrew bible existed in various forms throughout the Ancient Near East. These include the Flood stories, the Tree of Life image, aspects of the Joseph story and the other stories that were discussed in the chapter on Ancient Traditions. In this chapter the ideas and images coming from Canaan, Egypt and elsewhere in the region will be explored in terms of their impact on the culture and beliefs of Israel after 1200 but before the monarchic period.

The influence of the Canaanite religion

If it is correct that the nascent Israel included the desert Shasu and Canaanites displaced from the coastal towns, then it would have included both Yahwists and adherents to the ancient Canaanite religion. We should therefore expect to find ideas from both these sources embedded in the oral traditions of the pre-monarchic tribes.

Archaeological evidence shows that many Israelites had no difficulty in combining the two religions. It was customary to give children names incorporating the name of a god. Many parents gave some of their children names incorporating Baal and other children names incorporating Yahweh – even King David is said to have named one of his sons Baalyada (‘Baal-knows’)¹ and another Adonijah (‘Yahweh-is-Lord’). The Yahwists were not averse to assimilating elements of traditional Canaanite culture into their own religious experience – just as Christians have assimilated the tree and the date of the pagan festival of midwinter into their festival of Christmas.

The name of God

The most obvious assimilation is the use of ‘El’ in the Hebrew as well as the Canaanite scriptures. Both sets of texts were written in dialects of the Western Semitic, and in these dialects ‘El’ is used both as a general term meaning ‘god’ and as a proper name for God. Most of the ancient Canaanite texts available to us today come from Ugarit. They were written down in the 14th Century BCE, although almost certainly based on an earlier oral tradition. The earliest related biblical texts are the early Psalms some of which may date from the 10th Century BCE or thereabouts. In the bible, ‘El’ and ‘Elohim’, a related form, were names given to the god of the ancestors by some of the writers whose work would later be edited to form the Torah, the first five books of the Hebrew bible.² That these names were inherited by Yahweh was made clear in the Exodus passage describing Moses’ vision in Exodus 3:15:

*‘Elohim said to Moses, ‘Thus you shall say unto the children of Israel,
“Yahweh, the Elohim of your fathers, the Elohim of Abraham, the Elohim of Isaac, and the
Elohim of Jacob, has sent me to you.”’*

and in Exodus 6:2-3

*‘Elohim spoke to Moses and said to him: “I am Yahweh. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac,
and Jacob as El Shaddai”’*

¹ See BCD article on ‘Beeliada’. The son is named thus in 1 Chron 14; 3-7. Other references changed the name to Elyada (‘God-knows’), presumably because of the authors distaste for a son of David with a Baalist name.

² In Genesis at least El is nearly always used as a proper name, God, and not as a general term for a divine being, god. It often occurs as part of a composite name such as ‘El Olam’ (Everlasting God) or ‘El Elyon’ (God on High). Elohim has a plural form; but when used as a name for God, we must presume that this form implies majesty – somewhat like the royal ‘we’. However ‘elohim’ is also used in the sense of ‘spirits’ or ‘great spirit’. In this latter sense it can be used of a man – much as in our time Ghandi is referred to as a ‘Great Soul’.

‘El Shaddai’, which is conventionally rendered as ‘God Almighty’, has no obvious Hebrew etymology, but ‘Shaddai’ can be derived from the Hurrian root for anything dome-shaped, with the result that some scholars suggest that the meaning of the name was something like ‘God, the Mountain One’. The Canaanite El lived on a mountain-top.

Both the Canaanite El and Biblical El were believed to dwell in tents³. In Canaanite scripture, El is described as ‘the kind, the compassionate’, just as Yahweh is ‘a merciful and gracious god’ and in the Koran, Allah is ‘the merciful, the kind’. The Canaanite El is ‘the father of time’ whilst in Genesis 21:33 he is El Olam ‘Everlasting God’. He is the ‘Bull of Jacob’ in Genesis 49:11⁴ and ‘El the Bull’ in Canaanite scripture. El is the ‘Creator of All’ for the Canaanites and Elohim is the name used in the bible for the great creation account of Genesis 1.⁵ The stories of the Patriarchs are shot through with references to El and to El Shaddai.⁶ The Canaanite inheritance also emerges in the bible in the Tower of Babel story and in some psalms where El appears to be part of a council of gods: -

*Elohim has taken his place in the Assembly of El⁷
In the midst of the gods he holds judgement⁸*

Or

‘Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there, so that they will not understand one another’s speech.’⁹

In a psalm 87 the connection is made clear by describing Yahweh as a ‘son of El’:

*For who in the heavens can be compared to Yahweh?
Who among the sons of El is like Yahweh?
El is greatly to be feared in the council of the holy ones,
great and awesome above all that are around him?¹⁰*

El lived on a mountain top. There he received his supplicants. Waters flowed from this mountain of El, in Canaanite scripture we read;

*‘Then Asherah headed towards El,
At the source of the two rivers.
In the middle of the two sea’s pools.
She opened El’s tent and entered
The shrine of the King, the Father of Time’¹¹*

And in the bible, the reference to two rivers was picked up in Zechariah 14:8

‘On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem, half of them to the eastern sea and half of them to the western sea;’

There are many other references to the waters of life flowing from Jerusalem¹². One of the streams that flow from the geographic Jerusalem, the Gihon, is mentioned in Genesis as the second of the

³ See Coogan’s Stories from Ancient Canaan p 99 – quoted below, and many biblical references, for example 2 Samuel 7:6.

⁴ A Literal translation suggested by Coogan in Stories from Ancient Canaan p 20. The usual translation is the ‘mighty one of Jacob’

⁵ The names of El are can be found throughout the Canaanite scriptures. An example can be found in the Baal poem where Anat ‘implored the Bull, El, the compassionate, she entreated the Creator of all’ and two pages later she entered the tent of ‘the king, the father of time’. Coogan (1978) pp 97 & 99

⁶ The Patriarchs came from the area around Haran, a city that is closer to Ugarit than to Jerusalem.

⁷ ‘Assembly of El’ is a literal translation; the NRSV uses ‘divine council’, whilst the SJV uses ‘the congregation of the mighty’!

⁸ Psalm 82: 1-2

⁹ Genesis 11:7

¹⁰ Psalm 87:6-7. ‘Sons of El’ is translated as ‘heavenly beings’ in NRSV.

¹¹ Coogan (1978) p 99

¹² Examples include Ezekiel 47:1-12, Joel 3:18 and Revelations 22:1-2

streams that flow from paradise.¹³ The mountain home of the Canaanite El was Zaphon, whilst Yahweh dwelt in Zion. In the bible, Zion is located in Jerusalem, a city that took El to be its patron god in ancient times. King Melchizedek of Jerusalem, who blessed Abram in Genesis 14 was said to be a priest of El Elyon.

The Seventh Day

It may be that we have inherited our seven-day week from Canaanite tradition, for seven was a number of great significance in Canaanite writing. After much preparation it was always on the seventh day that things happened. In the story of Aquat, Dan'el is seeking a son; he offers sacrifices to the gods for six days, and

Then, on the seventh day,
Baal approached the assembly with his plea'

Dan'el is told to go home and make love to his wife. He takes with him the wise women, to whom he offers food and drink for six days and

Then, on the seventh day,
The wise women left his house
...the pleasures of bed...
...the delights of bed...'¹⁴

The formula is repeated three more times in this poem alone.

It is thus entirely consistent with Canaanite tradition for a later Hebrew writer to write:

*'Then on the seventh day,
Elohim finished the work that he had done'*¹⁵

The Semi-Divine

The biblical Rephaim, too, may have had their origins in Canaanite tradition. In the Canaanite stories they appear as deified ancestors, or perhaps as attendants on El. In the bible they are an ancient race of giants or the 'shades' of the underworld¹⁶

The Rider on the Clouds

In certain respects, the biblical El differs from the Canaanite El. The biblical El is powerful; the Canaanite El is not. The polytheistic Canaanites could account for suffering by postulating that El had limited powers and was confronted by other gods. Conflict amongst the gods was mirrored on earth as the cause of suffering and disaster. But if there is only one all-powerful creator god, then the reality of suffering in the world poses a major theological problem for those who hold that god is also kind and compassionate. In the Hebrew bible attempts are made to resolve this problem in the book of Job and in the Suffering Servant poems often associated with 2nd Isaiah.

Just as El was the patron god of Jerusalem, so Baal was at one time the patron god of the coastal town of Ugarit. But by 1200 BCE there was no longer a temple to El in Ugarit. He had been replaced by the more powerful Baal (literally 'The Lord'). Baal was a more aggressive god who fought with Mot (Death). In the season when Mot defeated Baal, the heat destroyed the crops; but when Baal was restored to life, the new rains came and the earth revived. Baal was thus a god of the storm whose voice was thunder.

The priests of Yahweh appear to have incorporated some of these aspects of Baal into their concept of god. Both are described as the 'Rider on the clouds'¹⁷; both are described as flashing forth lightning and having a voice like thunder. Psalm 29 may well be echoing a hymn to Baal: -

*'The voice of Yahweh flashes forth lightning.
The voice of Yahweh shakes the wilderness;*

¹³ Genesis 2:13

¹⁴ Coogan (1978), pp 33 & 35

¹⁵ Genesis 2:2

¹⁶ Deut 2:11; Job 26:5; Isaiah 26:14, Proverbs 9:18 and elsewhere

¹⁷ See for example Psalm 68 and Coogan (1978) p 93

Both Yahweh and Baal destroy primeval sea monsters. In the Baal cycle: -

*'Baal seized Asherah's sons;
He struck Rabbim on the shoulder;
He struck the waves with his club'*¹⁸

Whilst in the Psalms we read;

*You rule the raging of the sea;
when its waves rise, you still them.
You crushed Rahab like a carcass;
you scattered your enemies with your mighty arm'*¹⁹

The Canaanites were primarily agriculturalists and their religion naturally reflected this. Thus the Canaanite Lord, 'Baal', the god who brought the fertile rain, was crucial in ensuring the continuity of the seasons.

*'Now the Lord will begin the rainy season,
the season of the Wadis in flood.
And he will sound his voice in the clouds,
flash his lightning on the earth.'*

Compare Exodus 19:

*"On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain"*²⁰

The Mountain of God and the Consort of El

Baal's home was on a mountain called Zaphon, north of Ugarit (Zaphon means 'North'). In Psalm 48, Zion and Zaphon are co-located;

*'Great is Yahweh and greatly to be praised in the city of our Elohim.
His holy mountain, beautiful in elevation, is the joy of all the earth
Mount Zion, in the recesses of Zaphon, the city of the great King.'*²¹

Asherah, as El's consort, was the 'mother of all' and thus an important goddess of birth. Even in Yahwist Israel, the ordinary people worshipped her in the 'high places', and in groves of trees, as trees were a symbol of life. Asherah poles, as symbolic trees, were set up as shrines to her. The bible records that an Asherah pole was erected by Macaah, the wife of Rehoboam, an early ruler of Judah. Although regularly removed from the temple, it was just as regularly replaced – so that some scholars consider that an Asherah pole was present inside the temple in Jerusalem for about a third of the time of the temple's existence.²² Whatever happened within the temple, Asherah retained a strong position in popular religion. Clay models of Asherah occur prolifically throughout all times and situations in ancient Israel and Judah. There is even an interesting piece of graffiti found in Northern Sinai dated to the 8th Century BCE which includes a blessing by 'Yahweh of Samaria and his Asherah'. In the popular mind, the wife of El became the wife of Yahweh. It is not surprising then, that for the strict Yahwist writer of the books of Kings, the suppression of 'high places' where Asherah was worshipped became the critical test by which the faithfulness of the Kings of Judah and Israel was to be judged. Some of Asherah's characteristics seem to have been inherited by the biblical 'Wisdom' who appears goddess-like to have a temple:

¹⁸ Coogan (1978) p 114

¹⁹ Psalm 89:9-10

²⁰ Exodus 19:16

²¹ Coogan (1978) p 22. The more usual translation of 'in the recesses of Zaphon' is 'in the far north'; this involves treating Zaphon not as a place name meaning 'North mountain', but as a direction meaning 'North'. Both have a similar implication since Zaphon is in the far North with respect to Jerusalem.

²² Rabinowitz (1991) 'The faces of God' p 84 footnote 468

*'Wisdom has built her house,
she has hewn her seven pillars.
She has slaughtered her animals,
she has mixed her wine,'²³*

Like Asherah;

*'She is a tree of life to those who lay hold of her.
Those who hold her fast are called happy.'²⁴*

And like Asherah

'She takes her stand at the top of the high places'²⁵

Her partnership with Yahweh is emphasised in Proverbs 8:29-31, when she joins with him in acts of creation proclaiming:

*I was daily his delight,
rejoicing before him always,
playing in his inhabited world
and delighting in the sons of men*

Her image as a 'tree of life' or a 'tree of knowledge' may lie beneath the Genesis 3 story of the forbidden tree in the garden of Eden. Worshipping Asherah was forbidden by the priests of Yahweh, so Yahweh Elohim forbids Adam and Eve to eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. But when Eve saw that the tree was to be desired 'to make one wise', she ate the fruit and gave some to Adam, and they were cast out from paradise. Is it thus implied in this story that the worship of Asherah led to ejection from paradise?

The Duty of Kings

Although those who came to Israel from a nomadic desert life may well have been averse to being ruled by kings, this form of organisation was a successful model very familiar to those who had come from the towns and cities of Canaan. They saw their king as their intermediary with the gods; he was El's son. Psalm 2, a coronation hymn, says;

*I will tell of the decree of Yahweh:
He said to me, "You are my son;
Today I have begotten you."*

If the King failed, then the crops would fail. In addition, the king was the protector of the weak and the preserver of good order. In the Canaanite story called Kirita, the king suffers a series of catastrophes; in his old age he has failed to provide for the succession, but El hears his prayers and a son is given to him; he suffers from an incurable disease, but divine intervention saves him from death only for his son to rebel against him. In his accusation, the son says to his father:

*"Weakness has stayed your hand:
You do not judge the cases of the widows,
You do not preside over the hearings of the oppressed;
You do not drive out those who plunder the poor,
You do not feed the orphan before you, the widow behind your back.*

*The sickbed has become your brother,
The stretcher your close friend.
Come down from your kingship - let me be king,
release your power - let me sit on the throne'²⁶*

²³ Proverbs 9:1-2

²⁴ Proverbs 3:16

²⁵ Proverbs 8:2 based on the KJV translation

A similar idea of the duty of Kings will be conveyed in the story of Absalom's revolt against David:

'Absalom used to rise early and stand beside the road into the gate; and when anyone brought a suit before the king for judgement, Absalom would call out and say, "From what city are you?" When the person said, "Your servant is of such and such a tribe in Israel." Absalom would say, "See, your claims are good and right; but there is no one deputed by the king to hear you." Absalom said moreover, "If only I were judge in the land! Then all who had a suit or cause might come to me, and I would give them justice."²⁷

The Form of Poetry

Finally, we should note that the Canaanite style of poetry influences much of the biblical writing of poetry. We see the same use of doublets and triplets in which a related idea, or the same idea in different words follows the first line. Coogan quotes an interesting example²⁸;

'Behold your enemy, Baal,
 behold you will kill your enemy,
 behold you will annihilate your foe
You will take your eternal kingship.
 your dominion forever and ever.'

This is echoed accurately, within the limits of translation, in both form and content by the psalmist's:

*Behold your enemies, Yahweh,
 behold your enemies shall perish;
 all evildoers shall be scattered.
Your kingdom is an eternal kingdom,
 and your dominion endures for ever²⁹*

Iconography

Much of the imagery that the Canaanites used for El and Baal is similar to the imagery of the poems and prose that will later be incorporated into the bible. When Judah came to have a temple in Jerusalem, the temple design and all the decorations – the pomegranates, the open flowers, the cherubim, the lions, the bulls and the palm trees – came directly from Canaanite practice and iconography.³⁰ It was predominantly from Canaan that the early Israelites inherited much of their religious imagery and the techniques they used in their early literature - a heritage confirmed by Ezekiel who wrote 'Your origin and your birth were in the land of the Canaanites.'

The influence on our own culture is not inconsiderable. El was portrayed as bearded in Canaanite art. In Michelangelo's work on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, a Canaanite would see a bearded El, the Rider on the Clouds, the Creator of All, a god who commands thunder and lightning, in the very process of bringing life into being. God even seems to have some of the heavenly council with him. The picture is steeped in the Canaanite iconography we have all subconsciously inherited.



²⁶ Based on "Stories from ancient Canaan" p 73-74

²⁷ 2 Samuel 15:2-4

²⁸ See 'Stories' p 15

²⁹ Psalm 92:9 followed by psalm 145:13.

³⁰ See the description of the temple in the next chapter for more detail and evidence.

Imagery from Egypt

The Canaanites who formed most of Israel thus had a deep influence on the imagery of early Israel. But was there also any imagery or literary influence that was brought by those who came out of Egypt? The strong similarity between Psalm 104 and the hymn to Aten quoted in the previous chapter is suggestive of an influence that may not just be limited to that single psalm. Aten was the ‘luminous, numinous power of the suns disk’³¹. The image of God as ‘light’ is very common:

<i>Yahweh, my god, lights up my darkness.</i>	Psalm 18:28
<i>Yahweh is my light and my salvation;</i>	Psalm 27:1
<i>For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light.</i>	Psalm 36:9
<i>O send out your light and your truth let them lead me</i>	Psalm 43 3

Jacob Rabinowitz argues that that the Hebrew word ‘qadosh’, usually translated as ‘holy’, is sometimes better translated as ‘bright’³² and thus in Isaiah’s vision of God, the seraphs are calling ‘Bright, bright, bright is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.’

The image of God as sun also leads to seeing divine activity in terms of days, and not seasons as would be typical for Canaanite or Mesopotamian gods.

*This is the day that Yahweh has made
Let us rejoice in it.*³³

The day is the unit of time that measures the work of creation in the great Genesis stories.

Other Influences

Archaeologists have uncovered a cult site east of the Jordan, where some oracles of Balaam are preserved³⁴. Although this site is from the 8th century BCE, it is thought that the last two of the oracles attributed to him in Numbers are much earlier - from the 11th century. The author of the poem appears to be aware of the divine promise to Abraham “*I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse*”³⁵:

*The oracle of Balaam son of Beor,
the oracle of the man whose eye is clear,
...
how fair are your tents, O Jacob,
your encampments, O Israel!
...
God who brings him out of Egypt,
is like the horns of a wild ox for him;
he shall devour nations that are his foes
and break their bones.
He shall strike with his arrows.

He crouched, he lay down like a lion,
and like a lioness; who will arouse him?
Blessed is everyone who blesses you,*

³¹ Oxford p 148.

³² Rabinowitz (1991) p.34, note 11. He rejects the usual derivation of ‘qadosh’ from the root ‘qd’ which implies separation, hence somewhat tenuously ‘set apart’ and thus ‘holy’. Instead he argues from the Akkadian ‘quddushu’ meaning ‘shining, gleaming’.

³³ Psalm 118

³⁴ The site of Tell Deir ‘Alla (east of the Jordan Valley, north of biblical Moab) has revealed a complex of buildings which may have had a religious purpose. Some of the walls have texts painted on them that tell of a non-biblical vision of Balaam. There is much doubt over its interpretation, but it may be that one of the gods, in disgust at the apparent perversity of the world, intended to put a permanent dark cloud over the earth and Balaam witnessed a debate amongst the gods concerning this idea. The text seems to date from roughly the mid to late eighth century BCE. The presence of a popular cult site rivalling Jerusalem may account for the negative priestly tradition about Balaam

³⁵ Genesis 12:1

and cursed is everyone who curses you."³⁶

Five early Songs

These ideas and images provided background material alongside which the tribes of Israel developed their early oral tradition. It is argued by some scholars that a few biblical texts use an archaic language suggestive of composition between 1200 BCE and 900 BCE. These include the 'Song of the Sea' (Exodus 15), the 'Song of Deborah' (Judges 5), the 'Testament of Jacob' (Genesis 49), the 'Blessing of Moses' (Deuteronomy 33) and the 'Song of Moses' (Deuteronomy 32). These poems have particular linguistic features. They make use of uncommon, probably archaic, grammatical forms and they do not make use of other grammatical forms that are commonplace in later biblical Hebrew – or at least they do not use them to anything like the same extent. The avoided grammatical conventions include the use of the definite article *ha-*, the sign of the direct object *'et*, and the relative pronoun *'asher*' meaning 'who' or 'which'. It is notable that these constructions are also absent from the extant Canaanite, with which Hebrew is closely related, but whose texts predate the bible.

These early texts are all poetry – a form more memorable than prose. There appears to be no songs of oppression – the equivalent of Negro spirituals. But there is, perhaps, a song of an escape, an exodus. Frank Moor Cross and David Freedman have argued that the 'Song of the Sea' is one of the earliest of the poems used in the bible, a view that seems to be generally accepted. Quoted earlier as an illustration of the establishment of the identity of Canaanite and Yahweh, it began:-

*"I will sing of Yahweh, for he has acted gloriously, gloriously!
horses and drivers he has thrown in the sea.
Yah is my strength and my song,
and has become my salvation;
This is my god, and I will praise him,
my father's Elohim, and I will exalt him.
Yahweh is a warrior;
Yahweh is his name.*"³⁷

This poem occurs twice, once accredited to Miriam and once, in an extended version, to Moses. This latter, and possibly later, version included lines describing the fear in neighbouring countries engendered by Yahweh's powerful acts:

*Peoples heard; they shuddered.
Shaking seized Philistia's people
And Edom's chiefs were terrified.
Trembling seized strong men of Moab
All Canaan's inhabitants dissolved.*³⁸

The leaders of Moab and Edom are not described as kings and Ammon is not even mentioned - sketchy evidence that the song may predate the establishment of kingdoms in these countries. The Philistines were settled in the coastal towns of the Southern Levant in around 1190-1170. Thus this stanza is certainly no earlier than the mid-12th century and probably no later than the 11th. The best linguistic evidence points to a 12th century form for the Hebrew used.³⁹ But the original poem, excluding this stanza, may have been earlier, when the proto-Israelites were still living a nomadic life amongst the Shasu. The poem was composed after the revelation and conversion to Yahwism, but with a recollection of an earlier faith still implicit – "*Yahweh is my god, my father's Elohim*"⁴⁰.

³⁶ Numbers 24: 3 - 9

³⁷ Exodus 15:1b – 3 The usual translators choice of horse and rider is wrong. The consonantal Hebrew is the same, but the Egyptians used chariotry, not cavalry until

³⁸ Exodus 15:15. The unusual image of Canaan 'dissolving' will be recalled in Rahab's comments to the spies in Jericho.

³⁹ Propp, 1999; p 508

⁴⁰ It should be admitted that this depends on how one chooses to translate El and Elohim. 'Yahweh is my god - the god of my Father' would also be a feasible translation that does not necessarily make the connection with the older religion.

Yahwism was established in the wilderness; it was the faith of a nomadic people. It would be natural that this would be reflected in their liturgy. The people believed that Yahweh tented amongst them and thus, as they moved, they would move his shrine with them, with the appropriate liturgy.

The 'Song of Moses' also reflects a particular stage in Israel's religious development. The people who had adopted Yahwism began to settle amongst those whose belief 'in years long past' rested in the Canaanite Pantheon. The author acknowledges many gods, whilst claiming Yahweh to be the god of a people as distinct from a geographic god, perhaps because the incomers could not claim a territory, but did claim tribal allegiances. The use of Elyon suggests that the poem was part of the northern inheritance.

*Remember days of old,
 consider years long past.
Ask your father, and he will inform you,
 your elders, and they will tell you.
When Elyon apportioned nations,
 when he divided humankind,
he fixed boundaries for peoples
 according to their numerous gods⁴¹;
Yahweh's own portion was his people,
 Jacob his allotted share.⁴²*

It was probably shortly after the arrival of the 'sea peoples' that the prophetess Deborah became a leader of the tribal coalition – or so it is written in the book of Judges. The king of Hazor (an area north of the Sea of Galilee) was oppressing the northern Israelites with '900 iron chariots' under the command of Sisera. The Hazor area may have been under Philistine control at this time, for it was they who brought the iron technology to the Levant. Deborah called out the tribes and achieved a notable victory, which is celebrated in a song. Of all the poems often considered to be ancient texts, this one probably emerged closest to the event it records – a struggle in the mid 12th century BCE⁴³. Its author may have been a woman with first hand experience of the battle.

*When locks are loosened in Israel,
 when the people volunteer,
bless Yahweh!
 Hear, kings!
 Listen, princes!*

*I, Oh yes, I will sing for Yahweh.
 I will play for Yahweh,
 God of Israel.*

*Yahweh, when you went out from Seir,
 when you marched from Edom's fields,
the earth trembled and the heavens dropped,
 dark clouds dropped water.
mountains flowed before Yahweh, the one of Sinai,
 before Yahweh, the god of Israel.⁴⁴*

The text provides evidence for the origins of Yahwism in Seir, Edom and Sinai. The poem describes the tribes who responded to the crisis and sent men to oppose Sisera and those that did not.

⁴¹ 'gods' comes from the texts found in Qumran. The Masoretic text has the 'Israelites', which makes little sense.

⁴² Deuteronomy 32: 7–8. Elyon was a poetic name for god, and the name of the Jebusite deity worshipped by Melchizedek (Gen 14). Psalm 110 has Judean kings described as priests "of the order of Melchizedek". Elyon is usually translated as the 'Most High'.

⁴³ See ABD article on Deborah by Robert G Boling. This includes a bibliography which mentions D.N. Freedman's article entitled "Early Israelite Poetry and Historical Reconstructions" (Pp 88-96 of *Symposium* Edited by F. M. Cross, Cambridge, Mas)

⁴⁴ Judges 5.2-5

The list of tribes in this poem differs significantly from those that will later be defined as the twelve tribes. In particular it is interesting to note that Judah, Simeon and Levi are not mentioned at all. The absence of Simeon and Judah endorses the idea of a northern coalition, consistent with an action to the north of Israel. The absence of the Levites may be because they had yet to settle in the land, or had thus far only settled in the south – or perhaps because they were excused the fight as they were a priestly tribe. The song included references to the tribes of Machir and Gilead – related tribes located near northern Jordan and therefore logically involved in this northern action against Hazor. Although some of the tribes failed to turn up, Israel was successful - partly as a result of the actions of another woman, Jael. Sisera comes to her tent seeking water:

*Blessed of women is Jael, wife of Heber the Kenite,
of tented women she is most blessed.
He asked for water; she gave him milk,
in a majestic bowl, she brought him cream.
With her left hand she reached for a tent peg,
with her right a workman's mallet.
She smote Sisera, she shattered his head.
She cut through and crushed his temple.
At her feet he knelt,
he fell,
he lay.
At her feet he knelt,
he fell,
Where he knelt,
he fell destroyed.* ⁴⁵

Jael was married to a Kenite, the tribe from Midian that some scholars suppose to have been early believers in Yahwism. She appears to have lived a nomadic life pasturing dairy herds, hence she offers milk not water; and owns a majestic bowl, perhaps similar to the ceramic-ware found in Iron Age I sites where bowls have been found decorated with human and animal figures.

Meanwhile back in Sisera's camp, his mother waits:

*Out of a window she looked down, she cried -
the mother of Sisera from behind the lattice:
Why the delay in his chariot's coming?
Why so untimely his chariot of war?
Her wisest ladies answer her,
and she herself repeats the words
Are they not looting
dividing the spoil?
A womb, two wombs
for the head of a man!⁴⁶
Looted dyed cloth for Sisera -
colourful looted dyed cloth -
Patterned stuff looted
for the neck of the looter!*

*So may they perish, all Yahweh's enemies.
But let those who love him burst out in strength like the sun* ⁴⁷

Although some feel that the final couplet was added later, it fits well artistically as the counterbalance to the storm of the opening. But whatever view is taken of the ending, the language of the song and the archaeology of the land encourage dating the song and the event it celebrates to the 11th century BCE.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Judges 5:24-27

⁴⁶ A literal translation. The euphemism for rape here is less obscure here than in the usual translation – “a girl or two for every man.”

⁴⁷ Judges 5:28-31

⁴⁸ Anderson, B. W. (1988). p 196

Somewhat similar language appears in the ‘Testament of Jacob’. This poem purports to be the last words of Jacob/Israel to his 11 sons. Simeon and Levi are condemned to be divided and scattered because of their violence. But when he comes to Judah he says:

*He crouched, he lay down like a lion, like a great lion.
Who will rouse him?
The sceptre shall not depart from Judah,
nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet.
His enemies shall come before him, fawning,
and the homage of the people shall be his;⁴⁹*

The song deals with events that biblically precede the ‘Song of the Sea’, but the tribal structure is the final accepted one and thus it may have become popular at a time significantly later – after Judah had become the settled dominant tribe in the southern hills. Reuben has lost the privileges of the first born, Simeon and Levi are to be scattered. Here it is the fourth son, Judah that is to inherit.

In the ‘Blessing of Moses’, the tribes are blessed in the manner of the ‘Testament of Jacob’, though now Simeon is missing from the list. It begins with the interesting statement that: -

*Yahweh came down from Sinai
He dawned upon us from Seir*

The poem thus confirms the Arabian origin of Yahwism that was apparent in the Song of Deborah. The poem seems to be quite ancient in other ways. For the author, the tribe of Joseph still existed. More verses are given to the tribe of Joseph than any other whilst Ephraim and Manasseh are treated as sub-divisions. It is Gad, not Judah, that is blessed by its enlargement, and recognised as a deserving the commander’s allotment. The emphasis on Northern tribes suggests this was a Northern poem – perhaps preserved by the Shiloh priesthood whose tradition held that Moses was their ancestor. Judah by contrast gets just one verse and even that treats it as a wayward child!

Some scholars believe that the tribe of Levi were amongst those that settled in Egypt (Testament of Jacob) from whence they escaped (Song of the Sea), became converted to Yahwism in the wilderness (Song of Moses) and were then integrated into the tribal system as priests (Blessing of Moses). Joseph receives the greatest blessings whilst Dan is now the tribe imaged as a lion.

The early Cult

The archaeological evidence from the early settlements shows little interest in cultic matters – no temples, altars or sacrificial sites. The early Israelites concentrated on agriculture. In so far as there was a popular religion, it may have revolved around a domestic reverence for Asherah – El’s wife in the Canaanite Pantheon –who became Yahweh’s wife in the mind of at least one graffiti-writing soldier and whose effigies can be found wherever Israelites settled.

The incoming Yahwists, however, may have established a number of cult sites, of which those at Gilgal, Shechem and Shiloh could have been amongst the earliest.

The problem of Innocent Suffering

There are several ancient texts which, like the Book of Job, wrestle with this profound theological problem. The Babylonian text “I will Praise the Lord of Wisdom” was written around 1000 BCE, although its origins may have been much earlier. There are also Egyptian texts on the same theme which, like the book of Job, have prose envelopes surrounding a poetic core. Most commentators would assign the poetic part of the book of Job to the post exilic period, but since Ezekiel knew of Job as an outstandingly righteous man on a par with Noah and Daniel⁵⁰, it is reasonable to assume that he was familiar with an earlier text now largely lost to us, but which began: -

One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before Yahweh, and the Accuser

⁴⁹ Genesis 49:9b-10. The translation of the last two lines is difficult. See Speiser in AB Genesis pp 365-366 for a discussion of the alternatives.

⁵⁰ Ezekiel 14:14 & 20

also came among them. Yahweh said to the Accuser, "Where have you come from?" The Accuser answered Yahweh, "From going to and fro on the earth and from walking up and down on it". Yahweh said to the Accuser, "Have you considered my servant Job? There is no-one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God (Elohim) and turns away from evil" Then the Accuser answered Yahweh, "Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not put a fence around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face." Yahweh said to the Accuser, "Very well, all that he has is in your power."⁵¹

The Babylonian text is a hymn of praise to Marduk who had redeemed the sufferer from an unjust reversal of fortune. Like the poetic core of Job, it is a story of a wealthy nobleman who comes to suffer social isolation and seriously gruesome diseases. Like Job, he never loses faith in his gods and like Job is ultimately redeemed and restored to his former fortune.⁵² The language of the core of the book of Job, and its use of the unusual Eloah as the name of god, suggests that the poetry is a post-exilic translation of an early Akkadian text, perhaps contemporary with the Hymn of Praise to Marduk, although there is no consensus on this point. What is clear is that the topic of unjust suffering was the occasion of significant writing throughout the Ancient Near East.

The Victory over Death

The main Baal poem tells of the struggle between Baal and Death. Baal is a dying and living god whose seasonal resurrection brings renewal to the earth. He is portrayed with human weaknesses including an arrogance that brings about his seasonal downfall. The poem begins with a proposal to reward the god of the storm for bringing fertility to the earth. The goddess Asherah, El's wife, says:

‘Let him construct his house of cedar!
 Let him construct his house of bricks!
 Let the Lord the conqueror be commanded
 "Call a caravan within your palace;
 The mountains will bring you much silver,
 the hills fine gold in abundance;
 The camels will bring you jewels.
 Build a house of purest lapis lazuli”

Then the Lord (Baal) triumphantly thunders from his new house and refuses to pay any more tribute to Death. He fights with Death, but he is swallowed. The earth dries up. Two gods go in search of the lost Lord. They find his dead body on Death's shore. El, the father of the gods, decides he will have to go down to the earth to replace Baal, but Anat, a ferocious goddess and Baal's sister pursues death:

Like the heart of a cow for her calf,
 like the heart of a ewe for her lamb,
 So was Anat's heart for the Lord.

She seized Death by the edge of his clothes,
 She grabbed him by the edge of his garments;
 She raised her voice and shouted
 “Come Death give me back my brother!”

Death's reply begins with language that is similar to that used by the 'Accuser' in the opening chapter of Job; he says : -

⁵¹ Job 1:6-12 "The Accuser" is a more literal translation than the more traditional "Satan", which is open to some misunderstanding. The passage has echoes of Sumerian ideas – the heavenly council – but has been adapted for Israelite audiences by the use of Yahweh – the Lord.

⁵² Cambridge p 255

'I was taking a walk,
 I was wandering
 On every mountain in the heart of the earth,
 on every hill in the heart of the fields;
 I felt a desire for a human being,
 a desire for the earth's masses.
 I arrived at my pleasant place, the desert pasture;
 the lovely fields on Death's shore.
 I approached Baal, the conqueror,
 I put him in my mouth like a lamb,

And so, with the rains ended, the earth is exposed to the killing heat of the Levantine summer:

'Sun, the god's torch burned;
 The heaven's shimmered under the sway of El's son Death
 One day passed, then two;
 the days became months.'
 Until once more Anat decides to deal with Death;
 the maiden Anat approached him
 Like the heart of a cow for her calf,
 like the heart of a ewe for her lamb,
 so was Anat's heart for the Lord.

 She seized El's son Death,
 with a sword she split him;
 With a sieve she winnowed him;
 with a fire she burned him;
 with a mill she ground him;
 in the fields she sowed him'

These are processes involved in the making of bread from wheat and of ensuring the continuity of the harvest. The images of splitting and burning also occur in Abram's strange sacrifice described in Genesis 15.

[God] said to him, "Bring me a three-year-old heifer, a three-year-old female goat, a three-year-old ram, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." He brought him all these and split them in two... When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day Yahweh made a covenant with Abram.'

In the Baal poem, the god El has a dream. In his dream, he sees Baal alive once more. Because this is a dream of the creator god, it becomes reality for all creation: -

"And if Baal, the conqueror, lives,
 if the Prince, the Lord of the earth, has revived,
 in a dream of El, the kind, the compassionate,
 in a vision of the creator of all,
 then let the heavens rain down oil,
 let the wadis run with honey;
 then I will know Baal, the conqueror lives,
 that the Prince, the lord of the earth, has revived."

The Lord, Baal, does revive and the crops flourish.

The poem is more complex than these extracts suggest. There is a suggestion that a seven-year cycle occurs in which the balance of power between Death and Baal alternates causing seven years of drought and seven years of plenty, just as in the Joseph story from Genesis there are the seven years of famine and the seven years of plenty. The text ends with a judgement spoken by the Sun to the gods, which contains an assurance that the ritual offerings made to the gods by the people would be effective:

"You will eat the sacrificial meal,
you will drink the offertory wine"
Sun judged the Healers,
Sun judged the divine ones:
"Gods, Death is yours"⁵³

The idea of a victory over death commemorated by sacramental food and wine is thus an early one. In Christian belief it is a key aspect of the sacrament of communion.

Gilgal, the place of the circle

'*Gilgal*' is the Hebrew for a 'circle'. According to the author of Joshua 4, this was the site of the first camp made by the Israelites after crossing the *yrđn* – the place where Joshua set up 12 stones to mark the spot – and, the author insists, "they are there to this day". It is the practise of the Bedouin today to mark off holy places for prayer with circles of stones in the desert. A holy place might be a large area, such as Mount Hermon in biblical times, or in our time the area around Mecca called '*Haram*' which interestingly is a cognate of 'Hermon'. The holy place at Gilgal appears to have been used for a few centuries, although no temple was ever built there. Its use for sacrifice was condemned by the prophets Amos and Hosea, who were active in the 8th century.⁵⁴

It is likely that the earliest form of sacrifice conducted at Gilgal and elsewhere, was the 'whole, or burnt, offering'. Originally called a *kalil*, the entire male animal was burnt and sent up as smoke.

*If your gift for a burnt offering is from the flock, from the sheep or goats, your offering shall be a male without blemish. ...the priest shall offer the whole and turn it into smoke on the altar; it is a burnt offering, an offering by fire of pleasing odor to Yahweh.*⁵⁵

The purpose of the gift could be celebration, entreaty, appeasement or expiation. Such offerings were common practice in the Ancient Near East. The word *kalil* may have come from Canaanite since the same root with the same meaning is attested in Ugaritic texts. The practice is recorded in Syria, Anatolia, Phoenicia and Canaan (but not in Egypt). It was regarded as the sacrifice most appealing to the gods since nothing was shared with humans. Later it became known as an '*ola*', perhaps because the skin was retained by the priests, so that it was no longer a 'whole' offering.⁵⁶ As Israel became a settled agricultural community, grain offerings also became acceptable.

Shechem and the covenant renewal ceremony

In the early years when Israel was establishing herself, it is thought that the tribes gathered periodically at Shechem to renew their covenant with Yahweh and possibly to admit new converts to the faith⁵⁷. Shechem appears to have had a 'Temple of the Covenant' which may have originally been used in Canaanite ceremonies. It is referred to in Judges 9, in the story about Abimelech and his attempt to become king of the tribes. This story incorporates passing references to a temple at Baal-Berith ("The [place of] the Covenant of 'Baal'") and also at El-Berith, which may be another name for the same place.⁵⁸ It may be significant that Shechem was the place where tradition holds that Jacob built an altar to El-Elohe-Israel. Shechem was in use as a major site till about 1125 BCE. Here the people committed themselves once more to refrain from serving other gods and a stone was erected, 'to be a witness in case you deny your god'. The priest may have recited the law, the blessing and the curse, the latter in a manner that is perhaps the basis for Deuteronomy 27 (the collection of curses set out at the end of the Deuteronomic Law).

⁵³ This translation comes from M. D. Coogan's "Stories from ancient Canaan" p 86-. I have occasionally replaced Baal with 'Lord' to indicate that Baal is not always a name, sometimes it is a title.

⁵⁴ Ancient Israel p 275 discusses the use of stone circles as holy places and the origins of Gilgal.

⁵⁵ Leviticus 1:10-13

⁵⁶ Leviticus 1 retains a developed form of the ritual. A discussion on its antiquity and function can be found in J Milgrom; Leviticus 1-16; pp 172-177.

⁵⁷ Joshua 24

⁵⁸ Judges 9: 4 & 46.

*Cursed be the person who makes a graven or molten image
Cursed be the person who dishonours his father and mother,
Cursed be the one who removes his neighbours landmark,
Cursed be the one who slays his neighbour in secret.⁵⁹*

After each curse the people said ‘So be it’,

It is generally agreed that the commandments evolved over time until they eventually formed around the core of the Ten Commandments as expressed in Exodus 20 or Deuteronomy 5. These curses hint at an early stage in the development with their references to the 2nd, 5th, 10th and 6th commandments.

Scholars have noticed that the full covenant ceremony described in Joshua 24 follows fairly closely the form of the Hittite and later Assyrian treaties. This is probably evidence of the political knowledge of the scribes who wrote this text many centuries later, rather than evidence of the form taken in the earliest covenant ceremonies. It seems unlikely that the early Shasu settlers would have been aware of the Hittite treaties involving the states north of Kadesh.

Whilst the priests hoped that most people would acknowledge Yahwism as their sole religion, there were from the earliest times a group of people who chose the make a deeper commitment. The Nazarites were a voluntary spiritual order which men and women could join for a period. Special laws applied to this group: They vowed to consecrate themselves to Yahweh, to take no wine or strong drink, to let their hair grow uncut, and never to go near a corpse, not even that of a family member.⁶⁰

But the rules that the priests wished to apply to the ordinary believer were tough enough: -

Whoever sacrifices to any god, other than Yahweh alone, shall be devoted to destruction (herem)...
You shall not blaspheme God, or curse a leader of your people.
You shall not delay to make your offerings...
The firstborn of your sons you shall give to me...
You shall be a people consecrated to me.⁶¹

The idea behind ‘herem’ is that of total sacrifice. No mortal should profit from the action taken. Thus wives, families and possessions were all subject to destruction when an individual was subject to *herem*. Logically this would mean that any non-Yahwist who fell into the power of an Israelite would be subject to ‘herem’. It followed that when Israel went to war, the enemy, who was usually non-Yahwist, should be totally destroyed. Just as the Israelites claimed to practice ‘herem’ to honour Yahweh, so did their neighbours to honour their gods. Mesha, king of Moab claims in his black obelisk that he killed all the population of Nebo, “for I had devoted them to destruction for the god Astar-Chemosh.”. Such claims should be treated as characteristic of the standard hyperbole of the time. There is no evidence that ‘herem’ was ever strictly applied in practice.⁶²

The gift of the firstborn, as required in this text, was without exception, but later it was written that human firstborn may be redeemed (Numbers 18:15) – although this option was not given to Abraham. The sacrifice of the firstborn may have been practised in the Ancient Middle East by societies in extremis. The Askelon wall at Karnak, which is generally taken to depict scenes of warfare in the coastal Levant contemporary with early Israel, shows the citizens of a town under siege doing just this.

Shiloh and the Ark Narrative

⁵⁹ Deut 27:15-17 & 24. Bernard Anderson suggests that this curse was typical of the form that might have used as part of a Covenant renewal ceremony. (Living World: p148)

⁶⁰ See Numbers 6 for a version of these laws, written in the late 8th century BCE. The story of Samson satirizes the Nazirite tradition.

⁶¹ Exodus 22:20,29 &31.

⁶² The archaeology of the time does not indicate that the towns and villages of the promised land were subject to complete destruction; quite the contrary. And the stories in Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings show Israelites living amongst others who did worship foreign gods. Nevertheless, a number of the stories in these books, such as the capture of Jericho, Achan’s disobedience, the withdrawal of Samuel’s blessing from Saul rely on this concept. These stories seem to have been written to express a wish about what might have happened – a priestly wish that their ancestors had got rid of all these troublesome non-believers.

Priestly laws also covered military activities;

*When you go to war in your land against the adversary who oppresses you, you shall sound an alarm with the trumpets, so that you may be remembered before Yahweh your God*⁶³

*You shall make yourself holy...*⁶⁴

*You shall give a portion of the booty...*⁶⁵

And warfare was to be guided by the Tummin and the Urim, which appear to have been devices, such as lots or dice, used by the priest to divine the intentions of Yahweh. The rules concerning the mustering of the troops may have reflected the fact that there was no permanent army. Getting the troops before the commanders was a three-stage process. The ideal, as envisaged within the tradition of the priesthood, was that they should first be addressed by the priest who reminded the volunteers that they should not be afraid since “*Yahweh your God goes with you, to fight for you against your enemies, and to give you victory.*” Then it was the turn of the administrators who were able to excuse anyone who had “*built a new house but not dedicated it, planted a vineyard but not yet enjoyed its fruit, become engaged but not yet married, or was simply afraid*” Only then were the military commanders permitted to take charge of the troops that remained. These rules, probably idealised by the later writers, emphasised Yahweh’s glory in any victory achieved.⁶⁶

Shiloh was remembered as an important site where the confederated tribes gathered and from where they went to war. It was in use until its destruction in the late 11th century⁶⁷ though it continued as a place of pilgrimage after that and retained an active priesthood⁶⁸.

Thus the loss of the ark in battle with the Philistines was a catastrophic event for the Israelites in general and for the Shiloh priesthood in particular. The capture of an enemy’s god was a relatively common feature of warfare in ancient times. Sometimes the victorious side would send the captured god’s image back, implying that the god was useless. McCarter, in his work on Samuel, draws attention to numerous similar stories circulating in the ancient Near East concerning the loss and recovery of gods. A particularly well documented example is the account of the capture of the image of the Babylonian god Marduk by the Elamites and its eventual return.⁶⁹

The response of the defeated side was not to recognise the impotence of their god, but rather to see the decision of their god to depart as their god’s chosen way of punishing his people for their sins. His return was then seen not as a further humiliation, but rather of his ultimate compassion for his people. The story can be embellished with anecdotes demonstrating the power of their god whilst in enemy territory. The Israelite response to the loss and recovery of the Ark fits the pattern of these stories. Known to scholars as the Ark Narrative a version of this story can be found embedded in chapters 2, 4 and 5 of the first book of Samuel. Probably originally an oral story circulated by the Shiloh priesthood, this particular written version incorporated a twist which can be seen as justifying the switch of priestly power away from Shiloh and towards Jerusalem, for the Ark did not return to Shiloh and it was the Shiloh priests themselves whose sins were responsible for its departure.

In this story, the cause of Yahweh’s displeasure was the behaviour of Eli’s sons, priests at Shiloh. They stole the meat of the sacrifices that the pilgrims brought and they slept with the shrines’ prostitutes. Eli knew what was going on but failed to restrain his sons. When the Philistines attacked the Israelites in a battle near Aphek⁷⁰, the Israelite forces called for the Ark to be brought into the

⁶³ Numbers 10: 8-9

⁶⁴ Numbers 31:21-24

⁶⁵ Numbers 31; 50-54

⁶⁶ Deuteronomy 20. The authors of Joshua, Judges and Samuel described warfare as being run in accordance with these rules. See for example Josh 6 & 7, Judges 20, I Sam 14 & 23 and 2 Sam 8. These examples cover the ‘conquest’ stories and the battles of the legendary King David. By the time the authors were writing, the monarch had established standing armies, often supplementing national troops with mercenaries, so the practices would have been somewhat different. These authors are not describing anything they have witnessed.

⁶⁷ Recent radio carbon dating of short lived samples taken from Shiloh’s destruction debris indicate a date of 1025 BCE with a standard deviation of 25 years. Finkelstein and Piasezky (2006)

⁶⁸ See, for example, the record of Ahijah of Shiloh, active in the monarchical times according to the author of I Kings 11:29

⁶⁹ P. Kyle McCarter, Jr; I Samuel; AB; p 24

⁷⁰ I Samuel 4

camp:

When the ark of the covenant of Yahweh came into the camp, all Israel gave a mighty shout, so that the earth resounded. When the Philistines heard the noise of the shouting, they said, "What does this great shouting in the camp of the Hebrews mean?" When they learned that the ark of Yahweh had come to the camp, the Philistines were afraid; for they said, "Gods have come into the camp." ...

But nevertheless,

Israel was defeated and fled - everyone to his home. There was very great slaughter; thirty squads of Israel's foot soldiers fell. The Ark of God was captured; and the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, died.

The Philistines took the ark of God and brought it into the temple of Dagon. When the people of Ashdod rose the next day, Dagon was found lying with his face to the ground before the Ark of Yahweh, apparently worshipping Yahweh!

So they took Dagon and put him back in his place. But when they rose early on the next morning, Dagon had fallen on his face to the ground before the Ark of Yahweh, and the head of Dagon and both his hands were lying cut off upon the threshold; only the trunk of Dagon was left. This is why the priests of Dagon and all who enter the temple of Dagon do not step on the threshold of Dagon in Ashdod to this day.⁷¹

The ark moved around the Philistine cities, and in each one Yahweh demonstrated his power, till finally the ark was returned, so the accompanied by a guilt-offering from the Philistines. The ark returned to Beth-Shemesh, where the people made the mistake of looking into the ark, and many of them died as a result. From there it was taken to Kiriath-Jearim, where Eleazar was sanctified as its guardian.⁷²

It can be argued that an earlier version of this theological explanation was preserved by the priests at Shiloh as they continued to minister to the pilgrims who visited their site. It accounts for the loss of the ark, whilst emphasising the continuing power of Yahweh. The Shiloh priests may also have preserved the story of Jephthah, which provides an explanation of the origin of the Girl's Festival that was celebrated there for four days every year. Other tribes and shrines would, no doubt, have preserved stories important to them, the stories of Shamgar, Gideon, Abimelech, Samson and the others which together with Deborah and Jephthah can now be found in the central chapters (3 – 16) of the book of Judges.

Early Psalms

There were other early cult sites well as Gilgal, Shiloh and Shechem. Samuel is mentioned as visiting not only Gilgal and Shiloh, but also Bethel, Mizpah and Ramah, his home town. Sacrifice and worship would no doubt take place at all these places, quite possibly associated with songs of praise and supplication. There are some psalms which are appropriate for the earliest stage of Israel's development, when it was not yet a kingdom, and which may therefore have been in use towards the end of the second millennium or the start of the first; psalms such as 19: -

*The heavens are telling the glory of El;
the sky proclaims the work of his hands.
Day pours forth words unto day,
and night passes knowledge unto night.
Without speech, without acts,
without their voice being heard,
their call goes out through all the earth,
and their words to the end of the world.*

⁷¹ 1 Samuel 4: 5-7 & 10 & 5: 2-5

⁷² In the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, the Ark is believed to reside today at Axum. There a single priest is appointed as its guardian, because it is dangerous for anyone to look upon the Ark, and therefore the guardian is not expected to live long.

*He has set a tent for Shamesh,
who comes out like a bridegroom from his chamber,
and like a warrior runs his course with joy.
He rises from the edge of heaven,
and to its edge he returns.
Nothing is hidden from his heat.⁷³*

Shamesh was the Sun-god of Mesopotamia and Canaan. (The name is translated as ‘the sun’ in NRSV.) These opening verses could well have once been a Canaanite hymn to El. The middle section develops into worship of Yahweh and his law, and then the hymn ends with the words: -

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart
be acceptable to you,
Yahweh, my rock and my redeemer.*

A version of these lines are retained to this day as the prayer spoken by many preachers as they begin their sermons.

The psalm subtitled ‘The voice of God in a Storm’⁷⁴ may also have had Canaanite antecedents; this time the imagery is the same as that commonly associated with Baal. (Try substituting Baal for Yahweh in the following text)

*Ascribe to Yahweh, O sons of El,
ascribe to Yahweh glory and strength.
Ascribe to Yahweh glory of his name;
worship Yahweh in holy splendour.*

*The voice of Yahweh is over the waters;
Yahweh, the god of glory, thunders over mighty waters.
The voice of Yahweh is powerful;
the voice of Yahweh is full of majesty.*

...
*The voice of Yahweh flashes forth flames of fire.
The voice of Yahweh shakes the wilderness;
Yahweh shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.*

*The voice of Yahweh makes the oaks whirl,
and strips the forest bare;
and in his temple all cry, “Glory!”*

*Yahweh sits enthroned over the flood;
Yahweh sits enthroned as king forever.
May Yahweh give strength to his people!
May Yahweh bless his people with peace!*

The poem ascribes to Yahweh all the thunder and lightning powers of Baal. The references to Yahweh being enthroned ‘over the flood’ and ‘over mighty waters’ recalls Baal’s triumph over ‘Judge River’ and ‘Prince Sea’. The hymn seems to be addressed to the sons of El

The worship of Yahweh will become established as a state religion when Israel and Judah become Kingdoms and the worship of Yahweh is established in a temple in Jerusalem. These events are linked by the biblical authors with David and Solomon. But historians have found it difficult to substantiate major aspects of the biblical accounts of these legendary leaders. This historical reality of 10th Century Israel and the origins of the stories, legends and myths surrounding the first kings are the subject of the next chapter.

⁷³ Psalm 19. See Dawood (1965) p 121 for the Canaanite origin of verses 1-7

⁷⁴ Psalm 29; See Dawood (1965) p 175 for the Canaanite attribution.