Judaism

Kuenen, Wellhausen and Robertson Smith in Old Testament Research

Abstract

Most Old Testament books are pseudepigraphs, works written much later than they purport to be, so as to make a point about the then present day as if it were an historical truth. Wellhausen was not to know therefore that the prophets' punitive force, the Assyrians, stood for the later Persians, and the message of justice and righteousness was a Persian one, a doctrine that had indeed been heard before—in the Zoroastrian religion. The prophets warned of the dire consequences if the people did not accept the new doctrine, because they were agents of the Persian shahs and their moral god, Ahuramazda. Their aim was to embed him as Yehouah (Iah, Ea) into the psyche of the diverse subject peoples of an empire of unprecedented size. Those who accepted the reform to their religion were identified as Juddin, Yehudim or Jews, and owed their loyalty to their God who dwelt on Mount Zion in Jerusalem, the center of a new temple state, Yehud (Judah).

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If the bible sets forth the personal converse of God with man, it is absolutely essential to look at the human side. The prophets and psalmists were not mere impassive channels through whose lips or pens God poured forth an abstract doctrine. He spoke not only through them, but to them and in them.

W Robertson Smith, The Old Testament in the Jewish Church, 1892

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Two Modern Prophets

For both Kuenen and Wellhausen, the religion of Israel could not be traced in any significant detail prior to the time of Moses. Both regarded the patriarchal narratives of Genesis as the anachronistic theological retrojections of a much later age, and both assumed that the original Hebrew religion had much more in common with other contemporary Semitic religions and nothing that was distinctive.

Gillian M Bediako, Primal Religion and the Bible, 1997

It was far worse in fact! Moses was a mythologized Ezra retrojected by a thousand years into the past, and nothing in the Jewish scriptures is certainly historical until Omri is mentioned, the founder of Samaria, the Israel of the Bible, and a real person of history, unlike David and Solomon who were supposed to have preceded him.
Abraham Kuenen and Julius Wellhausen—Christians but nonetheless honest scholars in the nineteenth century when that combination was still possible—considered the stories of the patriarchs to have been ethnographic myths or legends, likely, in fact, to have been stories of Aramæan gods deliberately brought down to earth. The real origin of the Jews and their religion was in the colonization of Judah from Persia, which, by then, ruled the known world.

The colonists were actually resettled from Aram of the Rivers, the area around the upper Euphrates and the Khabur, and it is their myths that were transliterated as the stories of the fathers, the Patriarchs, Abraham and his kin who undertook the self same migration as they did. The old Aramæan gods were made to stand for the original colonists who were to be “the fathers” of the Jewish race. They are spoken of indirectly as the gods of our fathers and such like titles, but are mortalized as typical colonists making the same journey from the region of Beth Eden around the cities of Harran and Ur (properly, Urfa) to Palestine.

Of course, the Canaanites who lived there already had their own shrines, sanctuaries and altars to their own gods, sacred places with a long history, and they were written into the founding “Deuteronomic” history of the colonists as a sop to the locals who were not meant to participate in the Persian plan to revise the local religion. They would only want it to remain as it was!

**Abraham**

So, Abraham and his sons stood for a forced movement of people in the fifth century BC, but retrojected by around a millennium into the past, and extended from a project of a few years to one lasting centuries—with an interlude in Egypt, depicted by the Persians as colonists because they had occupied Palestine for centuries—but then conveniently used to change the focus of Jewish origins from the east to the west, from Persia to Egypt, by the Ptolemies.

Kuenen for one had noticed that Abraham and his sons were remarkably advanced in their piety and understanding of God, long before either Moses or the Prophets in the biblical chronology. It suggested the early stories of Abraham and family were much later than the tales themselves pretended.

Moreover, in the religious myths of antiquity, a god was commonly portrayed as being a special or advanced type of human, so that human beings could converse with gods—expressed by Jaynes as being because humans then were not fully conscious, not thinking as we do now, but receiving their ideas as spoken instructions from gods. Human beings were not then accustomed to reasoning, but took their guidance from a type of intuition that came to them as spoken commands and orders, seemingly from outside their heads, and so taken to be from gods.

By around 500 BC, educated humans, the ruling classes, were satisfied they were thinking for themselves, and expressing themselves, but they maintained, for the benefit of the others, that they were under the direction of gods, as the others still were. With the growing sophistication of people, the others were coming to realize that they too were thinking for themselves, so it became expedient for the rulers to maintain that some men were still privileged to hear the gods speaking. They were
oracles and prophets.

The reason was that the ruling class by then fully appreciated the political and social value of religion as a means of ensuring voluntary obedience. They took steps to imprint it on to the simpler people in society as essential to civilization. And so it has remained. But already by the time of Christ, intelligent Jews had declared that even the age of prophecy was over. It existed only for the simple, and that too remains the same still, but for most, it was the era of the law.

**Moses**

In *The Religion of Israel*, Kuenen observed that like other Semites, “the Hebrews were undoubtedly polytheists”, who worshipped, among other things, stones! Wellhausen judged that Yehouah was a local or special name of El, the Semitic High God, that gained prominence from the prominent position granted to his worshippers. That seems correct, the authority for this being the Persians. Yehouah was the universal God of the pliant, obedient, subjects of the Persians whose temple was set up in Yehud, but who became the national God of the Jews when the temple state of Jerusalem outlived its Persian founders, and was inaugurated as the national state of Jews everywhere, but Jews only.

Many of Wellhausen’s intuitions become obvious when Moses is seen as a fantasized Ezra. A caste of noble, righteous priests emerging from a neglected and exploited underclass of Egyptian slaves escaping their captors in the second millennium BC, when Egypt was a superpower, is pure fantasy, but a similar caste established and enforced by a higher power—not God but Persia—a thousand years later is utterly realistic and convincing. It is eminently plausible, to use the word that is usually sufficient to persuade Christians of the unlikely myths of their own religion.

Wellhausen recognized that the authority of these priests would be enforced as divine, their precedent being in fact Zoroastrianism, with its moral God Ahuramazda and its caste of hereditary priests, the Magi. So, the original moral God was the Lord Mazda of the Persians—“Mazas” to Semites like the Assyrians—but Mazda had had to be replaced by the God of the Jews, Yehouah, and the original divine lawgiver, Mazda, was explained as the mortal agent, Moses, of the Jewish God, Yehouah.

To effect the changes would have required more than a generation, so, in the meantime, the authors of the law (*Deuteronomy*, in fact) and the Deuteronomic history made concessions to the original beliefs of the colonists with references to the “gods of their fathers” and such undefined formulae. The transition from the colonists’ Aramaean gods like Abraham and Isaac (the gods of their fathers) to Yehouah (a Jewish version of Ahura Mazda) was effected in the second generation and later by identifying the “God of their fathers” with Yehouah, brought to them by Moses.

The temple state of Jerusalem (Yehud, Judah) was set up by the Persians as the religious focus of Jews everywhere—a nation of Jewish priests—but then was set free of the Persians by Alexander the Great. Under the Egyptian rule of the descendents of Alexander’s general Ptolemy, the Persian Colonists’ scriptures were rewritten and cast into both Greek and Hebrew, a dead version of Phœnician adopted as a religious
language for Jews. Then the Seleucids of Syria took control, aimed to Hellenize Judaism without adequate allowance for the persistence of Persian tradition, and triggered the revolution of the Maccabees who fought the Seleucids with help from Rome and won independence from the Greeks.

The Jewish state, meant to be a nation of temple priests servicing Jews everywhere and collecting revenues for Persia had become a nation state of Jews, and the ethnic home of Jews as a people, though an ethnos they had never been. Their God had declined from being a universal god of Jews of any ethnos, to being the national God of newly ethnic Jews, whom God had chosen as His own people, and favored them. Meanwhile, naturally the revenues kept coming in, so Jewish priests quite suddenly became incredibly rich.

**Anachronisms**

It is a general law of history that truth is consistent, progressive and imperishable, while every falsehood is self-contradictory and ultimately falls to pieces.

W R Smith, *Prophets of Israel*, 1895

The “quite universal code of morals” (Wellhausen) of the Ten Commandments could hardly be compatible with a God who favored a particular people, denying the previous universality. Judaism has never been able to resolve the problem, and in its latest nationalist political habit of Zionism retreats farther and farther from the older universalism of the Persian concept. Christianity turned out to be the route by which Judaism could become universal again, but it too was swiftly corrupted.

Kuenen was shrewd enough, or honest enough, to see that the psalms attributed to David and the proverbs attributed to Solomon, and notionally dateable to around the beginning of the first millennium BC, on the bible’s internal chronology, could not possibly have emerged from the religious and literary context of the time and place. Literary and moral standards at that time were not refined enough to have matched the standards at the time when the Jewish scriptures actually emerged under the Ptolemies. Yet the scriptures have a strange mixture of a God of high moral intent acting in a far from moral way in favoring His Chosen against their rivals.

The supposed constancy of God is annihilated in the books of *Exodus* and *Numbers*. Either Yehouah was an old fashioned tribal war god, or a universal god concerned for everyone’s welfare. If He were the latter, laying down a moral code, He could not also have been the heartless monster of Joshua, say. Nor could Solomon have believed in a universal God when he was so ready to permit the worship of foreign gods who were national or tribal and supposedly not real. These myths were written much later than Ezra but had to conform with the accepted retributive principles laid down in the Deuteronomic history.

Kuenen felt similarly about the prophets. He saw that their general high morality was incompatible with the evidence of the religious development of the Israelites. He recognized that higher religious development did not necessarily follow advances in civilization and knowledge, but could definitely not happen without it. Society was too unsophisticated to have produced an order of high personal morality. The same can be said about literacy and scholarship, together with the fact that small impoverished states did not have the resources for such things or the need for them.
Higher morality and social values can evolve *in situ* only slowly. To happen quickly, they are imposed from without, usually by more civilized conquerors, though sometimes barbaric conquerors can be civilized by their conquest. The Persians had a highly moral god in Ahuramazda and a book religion in Zoroastrianism. Thus they could impose a moral order in support of civil order on their subjects.

Wellhausen commented on the universalism of the prophets from Amos and Hosiah onwards, and their emphasis on righteous living as opposed to pagan sacrifice, sometimes human. Their slogans were “Yehouah demands righteousness”, “Yehouah abhors injustice”. Wellhausen wrote:

> Sin or offence to the deity is a thing of purely moral character—with such emphasis, this doctrine had never before been heard.

Yet, despite his shrewd instincts about the biblical texts, Wellhausen was unable to postulate the fundamental challenge to the biblical chronology that was needed, so he was unable to relate the supposedly eighth century prophet with a period several centuries later on.

The prophetic books are pseudepigraphs, works written much later than they purport to be, so as to make a point about the then present day as if it were an historical truth. Wellhausen was not to know therefore that the prophets’ punitive force, the Assyrians, stood for the later Persians, and the message of justice and righteousness was a Persian one, a doctrine that had indeed been heard before—in the Zoroastrian religion. The prophets warned of the dire consequences, if the people did not accept the new doctrine, because they were agents of the Persian shahs and their moral god, Ahuramazda. Their aim was to embed him as Yehouah (Iah, Ea) into the psyche of the diverse subject peoples of an empire of unprecedented size. Those who accepted the reform to their religion were identified as Juddin, Yehudim or Jews, and owed their loyalty to their God who dwelt on Mount Zion in Jerusalem, the center of a new temple state, Yehud (Judah).

**Covenant**

The basis of the new moral doctrine was the covenant between the people and God, but as God was really the power of Persia, represented by the shah, the covenant with God had to be in the form of a treaty between two powers typical of those in the first two millennia BC. And so it is. It’s essence was that God would save those who were righteous, those who chose not to offend Him (really the Persian shah), those who obeyed the law! What law? The law read out to them by Ezra, and which was to become the law of Moses.

The principles involved are most clearly laid down in the three books of *Isaiah*, perhaps most clearly in second and third *Isaiah*. God’s covenant with the Jews—denoted pseudepigraphically by the name Israel because Israel was known by the Egyptians to have been a nation state in Palestine in ancient times—was to be centered on the morality of the people, which once achieved meant they could remain free—they would not have to suffer punitive expeditions from Persia.

Wellhausen wrote in his article, “Israel”, in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, that Isaiah
“took the first steps to the institution of the Church” in that his changes amounted to the establishment of an ecclesiastical state, in fact a temple state. Again Wellhausen shows the powers of his perception, for Isaiah was representing the Persian policy. The hidden aim of the temple state was to collect revenue, but the centralization of religion was important in itself.

Wellhausen had also realized that the covenant with God could not have been made in the second millennium BC, but was linked somehow to the people in the Jewish scriptures who advocated righteousness about 500 years later in biblical chronology—even later still in fact. He also saw that Deuteronomy, the so-called Second Law, was the programme by which the prophesied changes were to be instituted:

Deuteronomy epitomized the prophetic spirit in its predominantly social interest and in the motifs of its legislation, its ethical monotheism, the belief in Yehouah as the only god, the righteous and holy God, whom one must serve wholeheartedly, Yehouah’s covenant with Israel based on universal conditions.


In some ways, Abraham Kuenan, a slightly older man, was more perceptive and original even than Wellhausen. Accepting the chronology of the bible, he noted that the prophetic warnings were a response to the emergence of the Assyrians as a world power. Kuenan deduced that the new universalism was induced by the Assyrian empire, but we have no evidence that the Assyrian god, Asshur, was anything other than a typical Semitic god, like those of the Canaanites themselves. Asshur could hardly have been different morally from them, and quite unlike the Persian Ahuramazda, a few hundred years later, who was of an entirely different character.

Any time when there is no prospect of a world government, and jealousies between different tribes, let alone nations, were deep, there could be no thought of universalism. If anyone dreamt it, that is all it could remain—a dream. A force of unification sweeping all before it, and having done so, offering a stability rarely seen had to appear before the seed of universalism and monotheism could take root. It was Cyrus, the Persian conqueror, who offered the prospect of universalism.

**William Robertson Smith**

William Robertson Smith, an even more remarkable modern prophet, considered the Pentateuch was about law not about history, disagreeing with the Jewish interpretation of the Old Testament:

It must be considered that the Pentateuch was not written exclusively or even principally with a historic purpose.

Traditionally Christian scholars like to stick by the supposed Jewish “God of History” by affirming the facts of history as expressed in the bible, those being, they believed, what gave it its “realism”. In pursuit of the uniqueness of the “linear history” approach of the Old Testament, they deny that anyone other than the Jews had this linear perspective, even the Greeks thinking in terms of seasonal cycles. Moreover, they claim that this unique perspective exists in “the earliest forms of the literature
Israel produced, and in the pre-literary forms of the traditions”, as Gillian M Bediako puts it.

It is a remarkable thing to say. No one has any historical sequence of Israelite literature to be able to judge what characterizes early and late... except, of course, the bible, and, although that is arranged partially chronologically by content, it requires the bold assumption that the internal chronology of the bible is the same as that in which the books were written. Where we know anything or can make deductions from the events recorded, the two chronologies are not the same. Daniel purports to be sixth century BC, when it is actually second century BC. So, with only the bible to judge by, the experts who think they can see grammatical quirks and idiosyncratic vocabulary related to the period actually being described are simply being crass—tricksters fooling themselves in the hope of persuading the sheep of their sincerity.

In fact, the Persians had developed an hypothesis of a linear history of the world. Parts of it were spiritual, but the period relevant to human history, the material world went from its creation to its destruction, the intervening phase of linear history consisting of the battle of Good and Evil. It is this concept of history that was taken up by the Jews late in the biblical chronology, but retrojected into a mythical period of Abraham and Moses.

What then is to be made of the supposed “pre-literary forms of the traditions”? How can anyone know what the “pre-literary forms” of anything are? No one could write them down, and no one survived who was able to explain them in literary times, the transition from one to the other taking longer than a generation. It is wool to be pulled over the eyes of the naïve believer, who, believing by definition, can be fed anything to sustain their belief with no fear of a critical thought ever emerging.

**A Scientific Method**

So, for Smith, the “authoritative tradition of interpretation” could not deflect him from his firm belief in neutral, scientific methods of linguistic interpretation, and that the holy books could be studied by these methods:

The bible is spoken to us in the language of the men and the key to its true meaning must be sought in no ecclesiastical tradition or a priori theory but solely in these universal laws of interpretation by which all the language of men is understood. The clearness and certainty of the bible as a message from God to us depends on its strict conformity with the laws of human speech, on our right to assume that the ordinary methods by which other ancient books are studied are not misleading when applied to Scripture and do not require to be controlled by an authoritative tradition of interpretation.

Not surprisingly, Smith would not accept Jewish interpretations of their history and religion. Thus Jewish harmonization of the priestly laws in the *Priestly Code*, Smith attributed frankly to priestly greed:

A true understanding of the origins and purposes of the several books of the bible is not to be reached until we go beyond the traditions of later Judaism.
Smith spoke of the apparent discordance in the Jewish scriptures which left the reader feeling uneasy. He thought critical study of the bible would solve such problems, resolving that which “seems strange, foreign to current experience or at first sight positively unedifying”. Smith was as devout a Christian as any modern evangelical yet appreciated that whatever the effects made by God and His Holy Ghost, the scriptures had been transmitted to us through the hands of men—fallible men if not deliberately deceitful ones. History was the measure of its accuracy. God, the God of History, would have no purpose in making history different from the scriptures, but the reverse was quite possible. So he saw the higher criticism as “not the invention of modern scholars but the legitimate interpretation of historical facts”. Among them was that two different approaches to biblical criticism, literary criticism as well as higher criticism, both pointed in the same direction, even though many literary critics considered the saga of Moses was genuinely old. He wrote:

> It is our duty as Protestants to interpret the Scripture historically. The bible itself has a history. It was not written at one time or by a single person... It is our business to separate these elements one from another, to examine them one by one, and to comprehend each piece in the sense it had for the first writer and its relation to the needs of God's people and the time when it was written.

W R Smith, *The Old Testament in the Jewish Church*, 1881

A simple example is that of the passages in the bible that defy translation. Whatever the Christian might believe regarding the inerrancy of the bible were it properly understood, there are many passages in both testaments that cannot be made to make sense! Perhaps words have been garbled or omitted, but it could be that, in some cases, the meaning of words have been lost. The study of history, archaeology and the higher criticism can obviously help. In any case, no Protestant should deny the chance to go past a thousand years of Catholic dogma to try to get back to the original meaning of the bible in context. It might require the abandonment of a view long held, but is essential to get past the blockage of rabbinic and Catholic interpretation.

Bluntly interpreted, Smith was saying that a failure to study the bible by modern scholarship demonstrated a profound lack of faith. The believer does not believe they are right, but that God will guide them to what is right. Too many Christians have no faith that He will and dig themselves into a trench they feel safe in!

Essentially, for Smith, if the Word is living still, then it was living throughout the history of its transmission for those willing to hear it, and could never therefore have contradicted history. According to one’s gift of the Holy Ghost, of faith, the two aspects of the Word, scriptural and historical cannot be in conflict. The perception of conflict ought to be an encouragement to further honest study—not fudging—because everything is subject to divine providence and would become clear to those who sought it.

Amazingly, Smith saw that the bible was “a book of experimental religion”. That is indeed what it was, but the experimenters were not God and the Holy Ghost but the Persians, the Greeks and the Hasmonæans. He began with the realization that the strata of laws in the *Pentateuch* were not all revealed at the same time. He saw three main such strata:

1. *Exodus* 21-23—The First Legislation
The First Legislation in *Exodus* was actually written towards the end of the period in which the bible was compiled. Had it really been the first, and subsequent laws had been built on it, there would have been clearer evidence that this was so. Yet its main element was that of God’s righteousness and the need to be righteous, something extraordinarily advanced, socially and historically speaking. The First Legislation was placed early in the narrative to give a solid ancient background to the real law, *Deuteronomy*.

He considered that *Deuteronomy*...

...gives the highest and most spiritual view of the law, in which Our Lord himself directly attaches his teaching, and which cannot be placed at the beginning of the theocratic development without making the whole history unintelligible.

If then, *Deuteronomy* is the very basis of Judaism, the law upon which the theocracy was built, Smith must conclude that the “whole history” is indeed unintelligible, and, in fact, never happened as the bible describes it. Smith was that close to realizing that Judaism was founded by the Persians, not by Abraham sometime early in the second millennium BC, nor by Moses sometime later in the same millennium, but by Ezra sometime just after the middle of the first millennium BC. He wrote:

To insist the whole law is the work of Moses is to interpose a most serious difficulty.

It could be credible as God’s word “only for the time subsequent to Ezra”. It is the main reason the *Pentateuch* could not have been written before Ezra, let alone as early as it purports. He had appreciated that...

...a law fit for the age of Solomon or Hezekiah... could not be fit for immediate application in the days of Moses and Joshua.

Smith never doubted that God could do it, if it was His will, but he saw that such divine behavior would contradict God’s own aim of revealing Himself in history—the way that humans progress naturally. So, having decided on an historical revelation, He must first have framed His law consistent with it.

Smith also found it incredible that biblical scholars had not the least problem with the fact that, when Pericles brought civilization to Greece, the Jews had already lived under God’s law since some time before the Trojan War had even been fought, and this law was that of a confusion of escaping slaves from Egypt. It is paralleled in its unlikeliness by the historian of the court of king David some time around 1000 BC writing sophisticated accounts of the court’s and the kingdom’s organization and recent history 500 years before Herodotus. Similarly, the psalms are inevitably still attributed to that same mythical sovereign of 3000 years ago, even though no one can successfully argue that attribution is valid in view of internal and external evidence that they are much later, indeed that they were still being composed at the time of Christ.
Regarding *Chronicles*, Smith saw they were haggadah—biblical supplements of a generally non-legal but explanatory nature—rather than history—moralizing Hellenistic romances based on the original Deuteronomic history, but often reflecting more the views of the Chroniclers rather than the extant sacred history.

**Prophets**

Smith also saw that the prophets did not base their utterances on anything revealed to Moses:

> It is a simple matter of fact that the prophets do not refer to a written *Torah*, as the basis for their teaching... they absolutely deny the existence of a binding ritual law.

Prophets were “organs of spiritual revelation” who Amos (Amos 3:7) said “stood in the secret council of Yehouah, and knew the law of his working and the goal to which he was guiding his people”. Substitute the shah of persia for God and it all makes historical sense—prophets were propagandists for the policies of Persia. The prophets’ *Torah* was oral. They were demagogues who harangued the crowds in market places, putting across a point of view—the op-eds of their day! There were prophets arguing different outlooks, but only the prophets of the victors get into the compilation called the Jewish scriptures. Smith considered their Torah a “living word in the prophet’s mouth”, not yet a finished and complete system.

Smith felt there was more of Christ in the prophets and the psalms than in the *Pentateuch*, another example of his keen instinct, for Jesus was beyond doubt an Essene, and the Essenes especially regarded the prophets, considering themselves their heirs, and they were responsible for writing many of the psalms, so the psalms above all express an Essenic outlook.

The prophets represented for Smith “at once the purest conceptions and deepest national feelings which these ages could show”. They pointed out how people should act to follow God’s will. Indeed the sign of the true prophet was how right he was. He said the prophets appealed to...

> ...the Exodus, the wilderness journey, the law making and the establishment of Jews in Canaan as undoubted proof that Yehouah alone is the God of Israel.

It seems to be a reference to the Exodus from Egypt led by Moses, but that Exodus myth was written later. The real Exodus in the bible goes by the name of the “Return from Exile”. It was the enforced migration of the Persian colonists of Yehud from the Euphrates through the wilderness to Canaan, and the reading there of the law by Ezra when the temple was established. This is the Exodus the prophets spoke of for they were the propagandists who had to convince the people to go quietly, and to persuade the people already living there, the Am ha Eretz, that it was all God’s will. References to the proper Exodus, that from the region of Harran and Urfa appear in the original Jewish origin myth of Abraham, but this later one of Moses was meant to replace it, and references to it were changed to make it refer more explicitly to Moses and a fictional Exodus from Egypt, albeit based on known Egyptian history—the eviction of the Asiatic Shepherd Kings, the Hyksos. Typically, scholars will point to Mosaic...
allusions in the prophets as proof of the factuality of Moses, presumably on the
grounds that the compilers of the bible had no conception of redaction!

**Primitive Religion and Sociality**

People in general and Christians in particular think biblical Israel was unique in
having God at its helm, in being a theocracy. But—need it be said?—that is wrong.

Josephus in *Against Apion* aimed to show the antiquity of the Jews, claiming they
had kept detailed histories long before the Greeks and that these ancient royal
records were the framework of the Jewish scriptures. Smith could not credit it, and
nor mostly can even biblicists today. Smith thought primitive religion was quite
unlike the refined form of modern Christianity, or even of biblical Judaism. For
Smith:

> Primitive religion... was rooted in an experience of personal fellowship between man
> and God. This experience always took place in the context of an organic community
> so religion could be understood only when viewed in a social environment.

The simple reason why this should be so is that humans are naturally social animals.
They live in clans or tribes that they treat as a fellowship which even extends to past
generations, regarded as wise but easily angered spirits watching over the tribe and
its living members. These become gods, and one of them became the father of the
tribe, God.

Religion was part of the organized social life into which a man was born and to which
he conformed through life in the same unconscious way in which men fall into any
habitual practice of the society in which they live. Men took the gods and their
worship for granted... and if they reasoned or speculated about them, they did so on
the supposition that the traditional uses were fixed things, behind which their
reasonings must not go...

To us moderns, religion is above all a matter of individual conscience and reasoned
belief, but to the ancients, it was part of the citizen's public life, reduced to fixed
forms, which he was not bound to understand... So long as the prescribed forms
were duly observed... no one asked how his religion was rooted in his heart or
affected his reason... religion was entirely comprehended in the observance of
certain fixed rules of outward conduct.  W R Smith, *Religion of the Semites*, 1889

Smith had learnt from John Ferguson McLennan that the religious and social
structures of early societies were indistinguishable. We can distinguish them in
modern society precisely because religion is a distinct layer of society with its own
conventions. Then the conventions and institutions of society and religion were
intimately mixed within its own culture:

Smith linked the development of religious concepts to the political, social and
economic development of the people.

G M Bediako, *Primitive Religion and the Bible*

To primitive people, “to worship God was an holiday, an occasion of feasting”.
Religion was a calendar of festivities, and in large measure, it still is. Then the feast
was a consequence of a sacrifice or sacrifices, the flesh of the sacrificed beasts being eaten. The ritual was part of the calendar, part of the sequence of everyday events, indeed, dividing it into portions. The “sense of God’s favor, not the sense of sin” dominated, whence the feeling of joy and pleasure.

Israel was no different from her neighbors in Canaan. Each of them had a local god as their divine king, the human king acting on the god’s behalf on earth. Indeed, kingdoms then generally had that understanding, and it extended into Europe until recent times—the monarch had divine rights! Though the popular belief is that God is the only god, the bible is clear that He is not, otherwise how could other nations have their own gods? For Smith:

Hebrew ritual was not a thing by itself, but had a common foundation with that observed by their neighbors.

The ideas of the Israelites about unseen things were the common stock of Semitic people. Even the prophets were like those of other nations, and the Assyrians and Persians had moulded them into an effective propaganda weapon whereby they could put over to a discontented people that subjection to a wise and mighty power led by a just God would be in their better interests than remaining with the corrupt kings they were used to. Consequently the subjugation of these nations was easy for the Persians, many of the people welcoming the conquerors. It is still being done today.

Concerning the gods of the different Semitic peoples:

There was no room for a differentiation of functions such as we find in Greece. Nor was there much room for ascribing to Him any well marked individuality of character. Each Canaanite community had the same round of daily life, the same needs and wishes to bring before their god, the same forms of sacrifice and ritual.

W R Smith, Burnett Lectures III

In fact, each Canaanite community originally had the same pantheon of gods rather like the Greek one. The supreme god was El, a word that came to mean “god”, and it seems each city or nation had its own Baal, or local Lord, Yehouah being the Israelite and subsequently the Jewish one. Smith asked:

Can we show there was any substantial difference between the monolatry of the Israelites and that of their neighbors before the prophets had taught that Yehouah was the only true God?

The answer is no because there was no difference, but the problem is merely transferred. Why should some of the prophets have thought any differently? The answer is that they were propagandist for the Persians, who already had a moral God, Ahuramazda.

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Dr Michael David Magee

Michael D Magee was born in Hunslet, an industrial suburb of Leeds, Yorkshire, in
He attended Cockburn High School in South Leeds. He won a studentship to the Royal Military College of Science, Shrivenham, where he graduated with an honours degree in natural science in 1963. He went on to obtain a PhD degree from the University of Aston in Birmingham in 1967 and a teaching qualification, a PGCE, from Huddersfield before it was a university.

He carried out research at the Universities of Aston and Bradford, and at the Wool Industries Research Association, taught in a Further Education College in Devon for seven years and for ten years was an advisor to the UK government at the National Economic Development Office in London.

He has written three books, and, mainly in collaboration with Professor S Walker, a dozen scientific papers on the structure and interactions of small molecules investigated using microwave radiation. Working for the government he has written or edited some forty publications on microeconomic issues, and very many discussion papers and reports for the Sector Working Parties (SWPs) and Economic Development Committees (EDCs)—Wool Textiles, Man Made Fibres, Footwear and Electronics—of which he was secretary at various times in the 1980s.

He was brought up by Christian parents but was never indoctrinated into one dogma and was able from an early age to make his own judgements about the Christian religion.

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