

# Judaism

## Old Testament Research and Criticism

### Abstract

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The growth of Protestantism against Catholic dogma loosened the tethers that stopped free enquiry into the bible for a thousand years. Enlightenment and science led to the Higher Criticism of the bible. Julius Wellhausen showed that the law of Moses was misplaced in sacred history. It had to come at the end of the evolution of Judaism. The bible shows the tribe, society, at first was the prime entity, not the individual. Marx called it primitive communism. Anthropology found tribal totem power was the power of society, and it was eventually personified as a god. Such gods were the "religion" of the ANE. Then Persia entered a new phase. It was a huge empire in which local gods had fused under Zoroastrianism into an imperial God who transcended the material world. God was above Nature and controlled it, and the bible says He gave that control to humanity. Humanity was Nature's master. Humans just had to obey God's commands, and they were issued by the Persian king.

Freedom of inquiry was the essence of the Protestant tradition.

Herbert F Hahn, *The Old Testament in Modern Research*

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### Criticizing the Old Testament

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If something has been written down, then it has been written down by human beings using peculiarly human skills, such as language and symbolic representation. Once this was realized to be true of the bible, then what was previously considered the ultimate, universal and eternal Word of God became subject to the same study and appraisal as any other books. What had been thought of as sacred history unquestionable by mere mortals was now subject to free enquiry. It was the growth of Protestantism against Catholic dogma that loosened the tethers that had restricted free enquiry into the bible for over a thousand years. The subsequent Enlightenment, and the growth of science opened the barriers to investigation, leading to the Higher Criticism of the bible which revealed that it had been assembled almost piecemeal, and had been multiply edited before it arrived in the form it is now in.

Documents (J, E, P) seemed to be previous editions of *Genesis*, or sources from which

*Genesis* was compiled. A notable theme of them emerged as that the fortunes of the people depended upon God's requirements being met, as set out in a foundation document, the law, now considered by many to have been originally *Deuteronomy* (D), albeit not precisely as it now is. Bernard Duhm believed the four sources depended on the work of the Jewish prophets. Others thought the priestly document (P) had been original, but the core of *Deuteronomy* owed nothing to the priestly writings, so must have preceded it. Thus the order of development of Judaism was, it seemed, from prophets to the law, as expressed by *Deuteronomy*, to the extended law and ritual practises of the priestly document.

Now, the Jewish scriptures themselves establish the law as preceding the prophets by many centuries, so critical literary inspection of the bible contradicted its own content. The law had actually come after the prophets, towards the end of the biblical history, not near its beginning, as the scriptures made out. The critical approach rebutted the bible's own story that Moses had put in place ideal religious institutions at the outset, and the rest of Jewish history was the struggle to maintain them in the face of a recalcitrant people. Instead, the Jewish history revealed by criticism was more typical—a gradual evolution from quite primitive beginnings to a more complex religious and social system in which the Levitical institutions appeared nearer to the end than at the beginning of the history. It was all together more understandable and rational than the scriptural story itself, accepted uncritically.

It all fitted well also with the work of the popular Christian philosopher, Hegel, who had introduced the concept of “becoming” as more characteristic of reality than simply “being”. With this change of emphasis in thinking, evolution was in the air, and eventually Darwin suggested how it could have happened in living organisms. In the field of biblical criticism, Darwin's place was occupied by Julius Wellhausen—and to a lesser degree by Abraham Kuenen—who showed that the law of Moses was misplaced in the “sacred history”. The priestly refinements had to come at the end of the evolution of Judaism in the Ancient Near East (ANE). Wellhausen ignored the theologians as having an axe to grind. He ignored theology in favour of history. The religion of the Israelites had not been centralized in Jerusalem until the law required it, late in the day—after the supposed exile and return:

In Hebrew antiquity, worship was natural. It was the expression of life.

Later, it...

... became an end in itself, set apart in its own sphere... the old practices were denatured and rendered lifeless.

Many others have followed Wellhausen. His view of early religion in primitive society is mainstream now. Religion was originally indistinguishable from and inseparable from social living, then it emerged as a separate category and aspect of life, and so it has remained. For us now, it is the norm to regard religion as semi-detached from normal life, but in primitive tribal societies, not only was it not so, they had no conception of religion as anything other than a feature of tribal culture, like us eating meals at prescribed times, socializing in bars, pubs, clubs and football matches, and driving on a prescribed side of the road. Early human societies habitually met to

honour the tribal totem or God, at prescribed times and places according to prescribed rituals which they believed brought security and promoted tribal harmony. They were social occasions that ended with a feast and celebration. We see it as religion, but they did not. Yet we see it is sensible to drive on a given side of the road to prevent danger to drivers and pedestrians. They saw their rituals in the same way!

Further examination of the *Pentateuch* seems to reveal even more levels of compilation and redaction, some thought, but others considered it all to be illusion, the variations in style of the author. Benno Jacob in 1916 thought there were different sources in *Genesis*, that had been compiled together and integrated so closely by a single editor, that he was effectively a new author. *Deuteronomy*, for most experts, was the Jewish law, but the bible itself described a book of law being found hidden in the Jerusalem temple in the reign of king Josiah, in 621 BC. So, this date was taken as an anchor from which other sources could be dated by reference, forwards or backwards from it. Gustaf Hölzer in 1922, said all of the sources were post-exilic, meaning in the time of the Persian empire. He was right, but the biblical scholars could not bear to think of it, so pooh-poohed the idea or ignored it.

Many “scholars” had made Ezekiel the main work of the priestly school of authors, but C C Torrey, another inspired biblical critic, saw it as having been composed in Palestine, not Babylon, and as late as the third century. He decided from his studies that the whole of the Babylonian exile was a myth created by the Jerusalem priesthood. Though he was essentially right, given that the Jewish priests were under orders from Persia, it was a view that again was quickly ignored. Biblical “scholars” typically simply ignore whatever they do not like, and as biblical scholarship is a closed school, later students have to keep rediscovering these historical truths for themselves. If they try to make anything of them, they too are ignored. It is therefore no good for any biblical scholar’s career to be controversial. Fortunately not all of them care more for their careers than the truth, and some, of course, approach the subject from a different faculty like anthropology, sociology or archaeology.

## **William Robertson Smith**

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William Robertson Smith (*Religion of the Semites*) was one of those who realized that religion was not distinguished from the social and political culture of primitive people, so that people in primitive society would not have understood the demarcation we make today between religion and culture. To have separated out certain activities as religious would have baffled them. Everyone did what was necessary for life, and religious activity was as much a part of life to them as watching “reality TV” is to modern primitives. Any member of a tribe had to conform to the mores of the tribe. Worship was not a matter of personal conviction, but a social obligation, like attending school is for us, part of the culture of the group, and it was culture which distinguished one clan or tribe from another. To reject the tribal culture was to reject the tribe, and so, to be rejected by it.

Smith thought that primitive belief could be best understood through its rituals, which tended to be almost immutable once established, and sacrifice was a universal ritual of ancient times. When religion was integral with tribal culture, the concern of the whole group not just the individual person, sacrifice was a public ceremony

involving the whole of society, the occasion of a communal feast, a communion, according to Robertson Smith, and from this came religion. Different purposes were later established for different sacrifices once the priests became an autonomous class, but originally sacrifice was necessary to provide the substance of the communion feast.

Robertson Smith also realized that the sacred or holiness was not at first a quality like luminosity or beauty, but pertained simply to things set apart because they were communal things used for, or belonging to, only the tribal totem or tribal god. Profane or common things and people could not be allowed to be put in touch with anything set aside for the tribal power unless they had been sanctified by a suitable ritual. Sacred or holy objects and places could be approached only in prescribed ways. Basic ideas that Robertson Smith identified in primitive kinship groups have been preserved into modern Christianity—communion, atonement and sacrifice. In doing so, their original material reality metamorphozed into a “spiritual” reality.

Often in thinking about religion people make the mistake of nineteenth century scholars—they consider it to be a personal choice. In primitive tribes, it was not a choice at all. It was part of the tribal culture, what members of the tribe did together as a social unit. Wilhelm Wundt, in the first decade of the twentieth century, suggested personal psychology was insufficient to explain primitive religion. Group life had to be taken into account, as Adolf Basian had already suggested, but it was Emile Durkheim who brought this idea to fruition, though not for biblicalists.

Durkheim thought religion came from the belief of the group in a totem, an impersonal power which resided in the group to unify it and was therefore venerated by the group as the group experience—the sense of belonging to the group. R H Codrington had reported among the Melanesians their idea of an impersonal force they called *mana*, and many anthropologists had seen something like it as the source of religion and magic, but, although primitive people might have conceived of an impersonal force, it need not have been like that of the Melanesians. Totems had their own characteristics characteristic of the people, their environment and needs. The merging of families into tribes then nations necessitated the generalization of totem characteristics to the tribe and the nation—into powers like magic, order and truth—the *maat* of the Egyptians, the *arta* of the Persians—powers that even the gods were subject to!

## **Myth as Prelogical Logic**

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Lucien Levy-Bruhl regarded primitive people as being in a “prelogical” stage of conceptual development. Such people were not incapable of logic, but their logic was not our logic. We distinguish between the real and the imaginary, but prelogical people did not, so they had no divide between natural and supernatural, or material and spiritual, as we have. The totem power, the impersonal power of the social group, was a force—like gravity—which they experienced. It held them together. It made them what they were. Some people were thought to have more totem power than others, and the greatest of these could do alone what only the whole tribe could do in concert. They were leaders, persuasive men, charismatic men, “big men”, supermen! Others could capture and constrain and use the power—it became magic.

This power which brought people together on tribal occasions like a feast was identified with the object of the occasion, the meal, the food and the ingathering of grain, fruit and vegetables or slaughter of animals to provide it. The tribe had no need to consider the meal as a communion with the gods or the slaughter as a propitiatory sacrifice for them, as Robertson Smith and Tylor did respectively, because the ceremony preceded the idea of gods. It was a purely practical occasion for a communal feast for social bonding and a feed such as people only had at these times. But once the tribal totem was personified as a tribal founder, father, and eventually god, then the meal and the sacrifice easily took on the significance Tylor and Smith had seen in them.

Henri Frankfort considered (*Myth and Reality*, 1946) ancient thinking as “mythopoeic”, which one might anglicize to “mythopoetic”, a way of responding rather than thinking logically, and expressed in overtly metaphorical, poetic and mythical forms. The world, to ancient thinkers, was an assembly of powers which responded to events, as any human would, but without being personified for a long time yet. All of the consequences of the powers integrated into Nature, so that events, including human acts, influenced Nature. A social group, a clan or tribe, had to be held together by some power, a social power, the totem power, and this power exerted more influence on Nature than any individual could. Social rituals were therefore powerful, individuals were not, except those rare ones with a surfeit of the totem power.

Myths were invented to represent the powers and the actions they induced in an understandable way, so myths stood as means of explanation, as a prelogical logic. They provided, by dramatization in ritual, the ways in which powers worked, and by acting out the ritual, the powers were induced to do as the tribe wanted. These acts were not merely symbolic, but actually affected the world. The tribal chief or king had the main role in the drama, assisted by shamans, priests and priestesses. The chief or the king stood for the tribe and the tribe’s assembled power, the totem, which was one of the powers of Nature, because Nature and human society were continuous. The object of ritual was to focus the totem power in such a way as to promote the natural harmony of the tribe and Nature, and that way Nature would favour the tribe.

Once the totem power was personified as a tribal father, then a god, this was the “religion” of the most ancient people, including Greeks and Caananites, but the Persians, through Zoroastrianism, had gone into a new phase. Persia was a great empire, and tribal gods had fused into national ones, and then into an imperial one, who was so remote that He transcended the material world. God was not merely immanent in earthly things, as he had been, He was now above Nature—Nature had become His subject. The Jewish scriptures tell us that He had left Nature under human control, so humanity was no longer subject to Nature, but was its master. Humans, though, had to obey God’s will, and obey His every command. In practice, of course, God’s commands were issued by the Persian king *via* his chancellery.

## **Magic**

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Our word “magic” is from the word for the Persian caste of priests, the *magi*. The idea of magic did not begin with the *magi*, but the Persian priests were so adept at it that they left us the word we still have for it. When Alexander ended Persian hegemony in

the fourth century BC, large numbers of unemployed magi had to find a way of earning a crust in the new Hellenistic world. They did it by amazing the crowds they gathered in the market places, collecting disciples, forming schools, sects and philosophies based on the knowledge they had of Persian religion unknown to most people in the west, some of which proved to be highly influential. These wandering magicians were called *goëtae*, and they spread magical and astrological notions around the Greek and Roman empires.

Sigmund Mowinckel, a Norwegian scholar, noticed while studying the psalms that the “evil” of the supplication psalms was magic the suppliants thought was being wrought against them by “enemies”, and the blessing formulae in them were ritual magic, just as the cursing formulae were ritual maledictions. Sadly, Mowinckel concluded that all this confirmed the psalms were pre-exilic, ie pre-Persian, because he assumed the wonders of the Jewish religion precluded magic. It was actually set up by the Persian magi, the masters of magic, and the Levites seem to have been Jewish magi. Most of the psalms, if not them all, are post-Persian and the magical formulae in them show it.

Mowinckel also commented on the allusions in *Psalms* to a judgement of the “enemies”, a battle with a dragon, and a creation, which he concluded was an annual ritual dramatizing the enthronement of a divine king following his victory over primæval chaos. The New Year ceremony in Babylon and Egypt was celebrated by the dramatization of cult and creation myths in which the central character was the god as the divine king. The procedure was an extended imitative magic ritual of great potency and importance—it was the renewal by creation of the whole of the forthcoming year without which the community would suffer in vitality and prosperity.

In the biblical ritual, the divine king was Yehouah, the creator, or rather someone, probably the high priest, in the role. The circumstances of universal history were taken to be reflected in the annual festivities of the religion—one that Mowinckel thought began as a Canaanite fertility rite. The occasion was the New Year, when the people were led by the priests, themselves led by the divine king, David, in the procession. David, of course, is a title meaning “He Who is Loved”, or “the Beloved One”, the Canaanite god, Hadad.

The ceremony occurred near the spring equinox at harvest time. On this occasion or at a parallel one held at the autumn equinox, water was poured on the ground from the pool of Siloam to induce, by magic, the winter rains to fertilize a new harvest. Robertson Smith (*Religion of the Semites*) had already noted the magical significance of pouring water over the altar, and Sir J G Frazer had found similar rites of imitative magic in connexion with fertility rituals among widespread agricultural communities. The New Year ceremony of the enthronement of Yehouah was, then, a creative drama meant to induce the events it dramatized. Each year, God symbolically took his powers anew by defeating the chaos monster, then creating heaven with its lifegiving sun and rain, and the earth, the womb of all life. It was signalled by the sun rising over the mount of Olives (Elyon, the Most High) and illuminating the Holy Place by shining directly into it. The Holy Place of the temple represented the womb of the earth, and God impregnated the earth by his life giving light, then, in the autumn ritual, the rains would appear representing God’s semen.

It is likely that a peripatetic altar, the Ark, which had once travelled ceremonially from shrine to shrine, before Jerusalem was made the only Jewish cult center by the Persians, was the focus of the procession around the temple, and remained so even under the Persians. The cantors sang the accession psalms to proclaim the kingship of Yehouah, the whole drama being essentially hardly changed procedurally, under Persian rule, from what it had always been when the proceedings were purely concerned with fertility, but now they were being reinterpreted to stand for the whole of time culminating in the restoration of the original good creation by God at the End of Time. Samuel H Hooke was one of those who traced the elements of the festival from pre-Persian into much later times when the magical qualities of the divine king were transformed into the Persian notion of the Saoshyant, to yield the later Jewish concept of the Messiah as a saving king.

Thus it was that the annual ceremonies came to represent the whole of historical time, the world year, as well as the agricultural year, all reduced into a twelve day long festival. The puzzle is that no such ceremony is mentioned in the Jewish law books, but much of these were written or rewritten by the Egyptians in the third century BC, when they seem to have expunged all legal references to the pagan ceremony, leaving its traces only in the psalms. It was remembered by the Jewish sects that remained most loyal to the Persian original, notably the Essenes.

The notions of holiness, the sacred and the soul came from the basic idea of the totem power. The soul was the totem power as it impelled individual human behaviour. It was not, at first, considered something separate from the person. It was closer to our idea of the personality, it was the person embodied, the body mobilized into life by the breath of God. The presence or absence of the totem spirit, the soul, reflected itself as blessing, honour, or shame, or souls were thought to have had those qualities in greater or lesser amounts. Someone with a blessed soul conveyed happiness and joy to the tribe. Such a man was likely to become a “Big Man”, in later times a chief and later still a king.

The absence of blessing left people unhappy and brought sorrow. Honour keeps the soul righteous. Shame was the absence of honour, lack of courage and neglect of duty to the tribe or clan. Holiness or the sacred, what was at first reserved for communal activity, became what was reserved for venerating the totem power. Thereafter, it was a space or object which contained the totem power itself, then the god or the quality that accompanied the god’s presence. God conferred this quality, just as He conferred blessings, so a blessed soul was a holy soul.

All of this meant that human beings, at an early stage of the evolution of religion, did not think of themselves individually. They thought of the group, the clan or the tribe as being the prime entity. They as individuals were simply a unit of the tribe. It was what Marx had called primitive communism. The soul was an element of the tribal totem power, part of the tribal soul, and was impotent when separated from the other souls that comprised the tribe. Living righteously was living according to the culture of the tribe handed on from birth. A human being devoid of other human contact and community cannot develop proper human characteristics because we are social animals, and indeed *do* depend on society—on its culture—to make us what we are. That is why the individual soul was considered to depend upon the tribal soul for its existence. Those who were antisocial lacked blessings or might even have been cursed with madness. Loners were not normal human beings. Living communally was to

share with others in fellowship, and therefore to share their blessing. People who lived together were whole and so at peace, *salem* in the Semitic world of the bible. The name David is the one who is loved, and Solomon the one who is at peace, two vital qualities of successful societies. Such societies are righteous—honest and healthy. Those who were personally upright lived harmoniously with others in the group.

## Anthropological Studies

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Herman Gunkel, following the methods of Mommsen and Von Ranke, wanted to examine statements made in the bible as facts to be treated purely as historical sources before any further philosophical or theological interpretations are placed on them. Examining the myths pertaining to first and last things, Gunkel concluded that the source of these motifs was outside the bible. They existed in Babylonian sources. Remarkably biblical analysis previously had ignored anything outside the bible that might have been relevant. It was considered a world of its own. Yet many biblicists still continue to make fertile analyses based entirely on biblical “facts” and “chronology” unsupported outside the bible itself. They might as well have been analysing *The Lord of the Ring*.

A most important discovery, made in 1887, was that of the Tell el Amarna tablets, the diplomatic correspondence of Egypt with Babylon, Assyria, Syria and Palestine in the period of Akhnaten. They showed that these countries, though they had their own characteristics, had more in common than anyone had suspected. Rudolf Kittel took up the task of showing the importance of extra-biblical evidence, concluding that the people of the Palestinian hills were intimately connected with the common culture of the ANE. Sophisticated religions had preceded the writing of the Jewish scriptures, so that the biblical authors were not inventing new theologies but were drawing upon many religious conceptions more profound than any biblicists had considered, hidebound by the notion that God’s revelation must have been some vast improvement on anything that had gone before.

So, Hugo Winckler tried to relate the history of the Jews to that of neighbouring countries, believing that a Babylonian cultural hegemony existed throughout the ANE, and that had influenced the biblical stories. Friedrich Delitzsch concurred, and a controversy described as “Bible versus Babel” arose. The pan-Babylonians were right, though the culture they called Babylonian was much older than the New Babylonian empire scholars assume is what the bible means by Babylonia. The pan-Babylonian culture came to Babylonia *via* Sumeria and Akkadia, and was shared by Assyria, and, from the hegemony of these great empires over several millenia BC, and the trade and example they set, the whole of the ANE was influenced—perhaps Egypt least, but, even there to some extent, and especially when the Persians controlled and revised the works kept in the schools of life. The situation was much as it is today with most people in the world modeling themselves on the USA. But the obvious case of it in the bible came to Judah—previously in the Egyptian sphere of influence—largely from the fifth century Persian colonists, called in the bible the “returners from exile”, who were under directions to “restore” an ethical religion in Yehud, and themselves mainly came from the banks of the upper reaches of the Euphrates and its tributaries, and had a thoroughly Mesopotamian—ie pan-Babylonian—culture.



Gunkel had noted from the Amarna tablets that the Babylonian creation myth was familiar to the Canaanites of the fourteenth century BC. By assuming the dependence of *Genesis* on it, it was possible it had been written in the second millennium, and therefore by a Moses then living. Gunkel, however, realized that the *Genesis* we now have is a much later composition, and had lost several of the key elements of the Babylonian myth, even if not completely. The monster of chaos, Tiamat, had disappeared from the later work to leave God victorious over an abstract chaos rather than a symbolical representation of it. Note too that a victory over chaos to bring about the creation is not a creation *ex nihilo*.

Similarly, Hugo Gressman saw that the Syrians had a “Lord of Heaven” in the ninth century, certainly the storm god, Baal Hadad, but the more abstract notion of a universal God of Heaven was a later construct introduced to replace Baal Hadad by the Persians, modeling him on their own universal god of heaven, Ahuramazda. There are plenty of instances, particularly in *Psalms* where Yehouah has the characteristics of a storm god like Baal. So, it is hard not to believe that Yehouah is Baal by another name, the name preferred by the Persian colonists. Interestingly, the Persian name for the wind spirit is *wahu* and for good thought is *wohu*.

People in our rapidly changing world cannot conceive of the amazingly conservative, essentially static nature of ancient times. Most of everyday life did not change for millennia. In the ANE, marauders and imperialist armies passed through causing havoc from time to time, but then everything resumed as it was until it happened again. Significant and widespread change began with the Assyrians and was consciously pursued by the Persians, and even more effectively by the Greeks. And, of all institutions, religion is among the most conservative and static, so it is hardly surprising that theological concepts should have a long lifetime.

The cultures of successive Mesopotamian empires were essentially the same but one of the changes was that later overlords, like the Persians, forced their vassals to conform more closely with the imperial culture. They introduced cultural imperialism as well as political and military hegemony. They forced monotheism on to their conquered subjects, but did it while pretending to restore a local religion to its correct earlier form. In Syria, the Persian satrapy of Abarnahara, whose people were called Hebrews, the temple state of Yehud was made the religious center, and the colonials sent there were made into priests and tax collectors. Thus traditional religious tales of Syria were changed to be monotheistic, and so words like *elohim* meaning “gods” became God!

Of course, monotheism was not unknown in the ANE. It was not even unpopular, for, in practice, many worshippers opted for a favorite god or goddess of those available. They were effectively monotheistic personally. Moreover, each imperialist state had a national god—Ashur in Assyria, Marduk in Babylon, Sin in Syria and Arabia, and Ahuramazda in Persia where Zoroastrianism made monotheism obligatory for a while, at least among the nobility. In those cases, and that earlier on in Egypt of the Aten, the national god was considered of cosmic significance, and, according to Bruno Baentsch, the priests thought of all the gods of the pantheon as manifestations of the same cosmic power in the universe—the totem power of the old tribes made universal in an imperial age.

As usual with biblicists, even scholarly ones, they have an agenda, and Baentsch was

trying again to revive the antiquity of the Jewish scriptures and religion. The priests of the Palestinian shrines of the Amarna age had been influenced by Babylonian trends towards monotheism, or that was his “theory” meant to defend a fourteenth century Moses writing the books of the *Torah*, as the bible suggests contrary to all history. In any case, Moses did not deny that other gods existed beside Yehouah, any more than Zoroaster did, or Christianity still does. It was simply that Israel had one singular god of their own, just as Zoroastrians did and Christians still do. Other gods were simply the irrelevant gods of other nations, eventually redefined as demons or false gods. They were not denied an existence.

It is not monotheism but monolatry, as W Robertson Smith said. The biblical Israelites did not deny the existence of other gods, but they had no choice themselves, as henotheists do. The so-called polytheists of Babylon, Egypt and India could pick the deity they preferred from among the pantheon, so were often more henotheist than polytheist. Indeed, Max Müller coined the word when puzzled by the way the Vedic hymns to different Hindu gods often called the god “supreme” or “The One”. He realized that the worshippers of each god often thought of them as the supreme one or the only important one, and addressed them thus in the hymns they wrote in praise of them.

Wellhausen had pointed out that biblical history was not history but historiography written with the purpose of propagating a theology. The people to whom it was addressed, the people of Abarnahara, the Hebrews, were depicted as being chosen by God and favoured by Him as long as they remained righteous, meaning law abiding!

## Rudolf Kittel

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Rudolf Kittel also referred back to the fourteenth century BC el Amarna letters, and to Phœnician usage, in support of the antiquity of the bible in their use of *elohim* as a so-called plural of majesty—a word of plural form used as a singular to give a grander impression. A sounder inference is that “gods” stands for a concerted power, the power behind the gods—the tribal totem power universalized—acting through them all at the same time, and therefore inescapable by appealing to any favoured one of them. The conception of such a power behind the gods, Kittel thought, was itself a tendency towards monotheism.

Kittel knew that the Canaanite high god was El, the king of the heavenly court of gods, and the bible itself suggests what H F Hahn (*The Old Testament in Modern Research*, 1956) calls “a nearly suppressed memory of El worship”, so here was Moses’s exalted idea of God in embryo. The Mosaic idea of God was that of a king, a judge and a lawmaker, a notion Kittel thought was unique. Actually it seems to be just what any god would be expected to be, especially the high god who was the king of the gods. A mortal king was a ruler, a judge and a lawmaker, and he stood for the national god on earth, so how could the king of the gods not have the same duties? Kittel has no unique case at all, but a commonplace one, and surely that gives him a better case for an early date for the *Torah*. The trouble is that Kittel then tries to explain the behaviour of the Israelites for centuries after the supposed early innovations of Moses by claiming that the exalted idea was forgotten by all bar a few true believers as soon as the tribes were perverted by the Canaanites—whose idea of god, Baal, was not so lofty—after conquering and settling in their land. The Israelites

had a better concept than the Canaanites of God, like that of the Canaanite El, but abandoned it for the lower concept of the Canaanite god, Baal. Only the faithful followers of the Mosaic concept of god as El struggled on in the shade for centuries, protesting occasionally as prophets, until the prophetic movement finally established Judaism.

It is hardly scholarly, is it, even though it is the sort of nonsense believers will believe? And where does Yehouah come into it when the Canaanites had an exalted notion of god in El that could have evolved into the biblical idea of God? Kittel thinks El, Baal and Yehouah were worshipped in Canaan and Israel all at the same time. So, objectively, there was nothing to choose between Canaan and Israel. Israel was chosen by God in the scriptures, but nothing bears out such a history. It is much more parsimonious to accept that the Israelites were Canaanites, and that the religion of Palestine was always Canaanite religion until at a time much later than the setting of the Moses myth a change occurred.

Kittel in seeking to defend sacred history exposes how false it is. The postulated spiritual minority who soldier on against the odds is a creation of the bible—the example of how chosen people should be. It is the very theme of the Deuteronomic historian, unverified in reality, but Kittel falls for it. Eventually, the religion of Canaan was changed when the Persians ruled the country and wanted it as a bastion against Egypt. They set up the nation of priests by sending in colonists to restore the religion to how it was meant to be, setting up a temple state to be the focus of loyalty of their subjects.

In 1929, more tablets were found at Ras Shamra, ancient Ugarit, which showed some similarities between rituals described in the bible and those of the ancient Canaanites, including words used for sacrifices, and methods of slaughter as described in the Priestly Code. The tablets also confirmed what Kittel had surmised about El, and the similar characteristics he had with Yehouah. El was a distant god, father and king of the gods themselves, depicted as a bearded old man seated on a throne and called “Father of Years” (cf Ancient of Days). The main difference is that Yehouah is now considered an only god, even though the bible in places does not suggest He is. Effectively, the Ras Shamra tablets suggest that aspects of the god of the bible were based on Canaanite precedents, but He had transfigured from Canaanite polytheism into biblical monotheism.

Moreover, they show that Baal was not a generic title for a variety of Ugaritic gods, but stood for one important son of El. They also include a myth about the slaying of a monster, paralleling passages in the bible where a monster called Rahab or Leviathan is defeated. They supported Mowinckel’s hypothesis of a cult myth celebrated at a New Year festival. Paul Humbert (1935) showed that *Genesis* 1 was chanted as part of the liturgy of a New Year festival. Johannes Pedersen similarly showed that the exodus story was the cult myth created as a new interpretation of the Passover festival—once a harvest festival of the Canaanites—and the Sinai events justified a New Year celebration at Jerusalem which dramatized a theophany, the sealing of a covenant, and the ordination of divine commands, according to Sigmund Mowinckel. The theological beliefs of the Canaanites of Ugarit and those of the Palestinian hills, whether called Hebrews, Israelites, or Judahites in the bible, were apparently as similar as can be expected in descriptions separated by almost a millennium of history, and major cultural changes brought on by different overlords, notably that

implemented by the Persian shahs.

The scholars who had suggested a pan-Babylonian culture across the fertile crescent were also vindicated. The Ras Shamra texts contained most of the core elements of this pattern of belief, and evidently the pre-Persian religion of Palestine conformed with it. Once this is accepted, it is clear that the prophetic tradition of the bible, and the Deuteronomic law signified a peculiar break with a long lived and widespread tradition. The tension between two opposites present in the Jewish scriptures, noted by Ernst Sellin, is the tension between the old Canaanite tradition, traces of which still remain in the bible, and presented as sinful or wicked, and a completely new concept imposed on to it, and presented as righteous.

## Form Criticism

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Gunkel assumes that the Old Testament—he began with *Genesis*—is compiled from an oral tradition passed down for centuries. These forms, or elements of tradition, could be identified, sequenced and thus yield the history of the whole book. He ended up with categories consisting of brief stories about heroes, then complete legends, and lastly story cycles, each skilfully woven into a continuous narrative. Though an important step forward in biblical criticism, much of Gunkel’s form criticism depends on internal analysis that is self-referential and therefore worthless without external confirmation, but he was not fooled into believing that his method produced anything truly historical. Yes, he believed he could discern the levels of structure, but realized the material that constituted them was mythical and poetical to the extent that any “kernel” of historic truth in them was smothered by fiction.

The fact is that the process of compiling the alleged forms of oral “history” amounted to the rewriting of them, whence the skilful weaving of the elements into a continuous narrative. Once that is accepted, the strata Gunkel supposes will have been largely smoothed over. Gunkel might have been discerning units of structure deliberately set in the narrative to be easily recollected, like the “hooks” of modern popular songs. The reason was that the material was written to be read out to the throngs of worshippers assembled in the temple, exhortations meant to extol the law and righteousness among the citizenry, and so the authors wanted episodes to be memorable, to be retold and remembered in context. Among them will have been extant tales used to illustrate a law that was presented as being traditional, but requiring restoring to a pristine original! Otherwise, much of form criticism is illusion. Most significant was Gunkel’s summary—the compilation was skilfully edited into a continuous narrative, and the narrative itself is only semi-historical. In fact, form criticism upheld Wellhausen.

Gunkel observed that the religious poetical forms used in the scriptures had a long history, but he thought they had reached their zenith before the Persian period. Typically, he wanted to date the psalms—allegedly authored by king David—as early as possible. The religious poetry of Egypt and Babylon compared with some of those in the bible, again evidence of the wide spread of the common culture of the ANE. Penitential biblical hymns were similar to the same sort of hymns from Babylon, and the thanksgiving hymns similar to those of Egypt. So, these types were not original in the Judaeo-Christian bible, but the Ras Shamra tablets showed that the Jewish scriptures were not direct imitations of superior cultures, for the parallels in the

Ugaritic literature were closer to the scriptures than those of Babylon and Egypt.

The superior cultures had already made their mark in the region before the fourteenth century BC. Besides similar literary forms and stylistic features, the description and attributes of the gods' words and phrases were mirrored in the biblical psalms. In particular *Psalms 29* was as close as it was possible to get, given different languages and lettering to a Ugaritic poem with the only difference being that Yehouah had been substituted for Baal. The notorious scriptural jealousy of Yehouah evidently did not extend this far. The comparisons are consistent with evolution over a thousand years, and deliberate alterations to impose new and alien values on to the Canaanite Israelites under Persian hegemony.

Yet form critics continued to try to analyze the scriptures entirely internally. Kurt Galling could conclude that, of the two traditions it contains of the calling of Israel, that of Abraham and that of Moses, it is the latter that is mentioned throughout Israel's history. What he means is that it is alluded to more regularly throughout the Jewish scriptures, and therefore throughout the fictional history of Israel it narrates. It is easily explained. A Ptolemæic redacter was more thorough in pressing the Exodus myth than earlier editors had the Abrahamic myth. He might even have substituted the new foundation myth for the old one in places. The new edition written by the Ptolemies reflected the dislike of the Greeks for the Persians, and the Ptolemies of Egypt for the Seleucids of Babylon. Galling therefore draws precisely the wrong conclusion—that the Exodus myth was original, not the myth of Abraham. Abraham had stood for the archetypal Persian colonist—a “returner” in biblical terminology. The Ptolemæic editor wanted to show the Jews as originating in Egypt not in Mesopotamia.

## Sociological Studies

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Wellhausen and Robertson Smith both saw religion as social. Both the history of religion school and the form critics accepted it and tried to extract the cultural context or “*sitz im leben*” of biblical passages. Every religion and aspect of it had its appropriate social context, and influenced society. So, sociologists sought to investigate this interaction. But this very description was found to be misleading in suggesting two separate components of life interacting. Some soon realized that there was no such interaction because there were not two separate components. Religion and society were not two components of life that interacted, they were integrated in one single life. Max Weber was not convinced that the Marxian idea—that the basis of all social activity was economic—was true. From recent European experience of the Reformation and the rise of capitalism, he claimed that capitalism had arisen from a religious ethic, the Protestant ethic of frugality and hard work. Religion had determined the economic system not the reverse.

Richard H Tawney (*Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*) demolished Weber's idea. Many of Weber's ideas were pure fantasy, depending on a literal interpretation of the bible, and of God actively signing covenants with His people, but some of his conclusions were sounder. He observed that the prophets of the Jewish scriptures sided with the people, though they did not advocate democracy or rebellion to right the wrongs of oppression, or to establish natural rights. Their declarations were neither economic nor political but ethical. People needed to be ruled but rule should

be just. The prophets were propagandists for a ruler who was promising to be better at it than the incumbents. It was the Persian shah. Canaanites had been under the yoke of Egyptians, Assyrians and Babylonians successively. The pseudepigraphical prophets criticized them all as unjust. The shah of Persia would provide justice, he would be the messiah of the oppressed. The prophets were recommending that the people welcome the coming of the Persians, and would benefit from it.

Albrecht Alt accepted a sociological view, but thought the biblical foundation myth of exodus was true history in that Israelite society was tribal but the Canaanites were city folk. Thus expressions like “god of the fathers”—god of Abraham, god of Isaac and mighty one of Jacob—suggested the names of the founders of tribes and their gods. Naturally, there were tribal features. All societies had been through such a phase at some time in their past. Moreover, the “god of Abraham” could just as easily have been an editor’s change from the “god Abraham”, made in the interest of monotheism. Thus various gods were perhaps brought down to earth as notional tribal fathers. These gods would then have been the actual local gods of the Persian colonists sent into Judah to “restore” Israelite religion—restore the “proper” worship of Yehouah, according to Persian prescriptions.

Abraham Menes linked all this into the law by finding the law of the Book of the Covenant, and of *Deuteronomy* to have been social laws rather than religious ones. In short, they simply were the law. As ever, Menes believed the bible’s own chronology, assuming these were pre-exilic laws, but the law was actually brought by the Persians, and while intended as social, it also used religion for social ends. It is better for a ruler that their subjects conform to legal standards voluntarily, than to have to force them to. That is the point of morality.

William C Graham and Herbert G May (*Culture and Conscience*, 1936) followed James H Breasted in thinking that culture preceded conscience. Early humans were social beings before they developed any sense of individuality, particularly individual responsibility. In small tribes and social groups, people were culturally conditioned to believe in group norms, and had little temptation not to do so. In larger groups, it became possible for dissident individuals and sub groups to defy group norms. Something more than everyday culture was needed, and this was the stage when individual responsibility to the group had to be promoted as a virtue in its own right. It was morality, and it was done through conscience. It was, perhaps, not so much that people in the group phase had no conscience, but that no one would conscientiously object to a cultural norm, and, if they did, they would be expelled from the clan or tribe. In larger groups, dissension was much more possible in the formation of sub cultures which could set up their own norms, and so individual conscience had to be appealed to directly to maintain overall conformity and prevent the establishment of destructive counter cultures. Morality was thus distinguished from culture, and therefore so too was individual conscience.

Graham was also among those who rejected the biblical myth of a religion expressing a nomadic ideal struggling against Canaanite convention. He saw the prophets as a dissident minority highlighting the failings of the dominant Canaanite culture. It is the bible’s own story, and it is right in that the prophets were supporters of the new imperialism of the Persians against the previous imperialist kings, most immediately those of the Babylonians, who had left Palestine neglected and virtually ungoverned. The propagandist prophets recommended that the people back the Persians to effect

the overthrow of Babylon. Graham saw the work of the prophets as an ethical process whereby idealistic and socially responsible people aimed to regenerate a failing culture, when actually it was a political process, ostensibly with the same ideal but meant to smooth the way for a new ruler. Even so, Graham is correct to say the prophets...

...were able to contribute to the revitalization of the society into which they were born... They did something to the current range of values, and after they did what they did, the dominant culture of society was never quite the same as it had been before.  
W C Graham, *The Prophets and Israel's Culture*, (1934)

The propaganda of the Persian inclined prophets succeeded in the face of over half a century of total neglect by Babylon. The Persian king was welcomed as a messiah, as the bible unequivocally says, but subsequent re-editing and mixing of the original oracles has blurred the practical advantages they once contained, and set them into a remote past as warnings of the wrath and mercy of God which were realized in the myth of the exile and the return. The central message was that the people would be free as long as they were righteous and obedient, but scattered far and wide if they were unrighteous and disobedient. Graham couched it in terms of modern democracy and freedom of the individual, quite inappropriate for the time. The people could easily understand the message of the Deuteronomic historian—righteousness would be rewarded. It was a new philosophy of history, quite different from that of the Canaanites, but entirely in line with Zoroastrian thinking.

So, social historians like Salo W Baron (*A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, 1937) were utterly wrong to accept the bible at face value and conclude that the Israelite religion had always been an historical religion distinct from the Nature religions of the Canaanites. He ignores all the traces of the older Canaanite religion that have survived many redactions. The sense of history of the Jewish scriptures came from the Persian view of the world, and the sense of destiny was written into them to promote righteousness—defined by the law and so meaning law abiding. Consequently, Moses was a late myth, invented to turn Ezra, the true law bringer in Persian times, into Moses a mythical son of Egypt at a much earlier date. The Egyptian Greek kings, the Ptolemies, wrote the myth of the exodus to counter the established Persian myth.

The Persians had set up Judaism, and Yehud as a temple state, to be the religious focus of the many nations they had hegemony over. The Jews were at first the priests of this temple and religion—the local Canaanites were not admitted—so Yehud was a nation of priests, who were to be the light of many nations, namely the nations whom the Persians had as subjects in the world's mightiest empire, and whom they called Juddin. The Ptolemies were keen to recast the origins of the religion, emphasizing Egypt because in the meantime many Jews had settled or been resettled in Egypt during the Persian period as colonists or during the Greek period as displaced people. It suited the Ptolemies to keep all these foreign people on side or else their loyalties might have gone with the Seleucids leaving a dangerous fifth column in Egypt when it was in serious rivalry and even warfare with the Seleucids of Babylon and Syria.

So, Baron was wrong. The Jewish religion not the absolute and final revelation of God to Moses in the second millennium BC, but an invention of the fifth century BC,

modified in the third century BC, and modified again up to the time of Christ, when it split, after the Jewish War with Rome, into the the Rabbinic Judaism of the Pharisees and the apocalyptic Christianity of the Essenes. The Persians refined the use of religion as a consciously used political tool. The believer's duty was submission to God's will (cf Islam) by observing the law as required in God's covenant with His people (Judaism). Christianity sprang from Judaism with its emphasis on apocalyptic and the arrival of a saviour, the messiah in Judaism, but derived from the Saoshyant of Persian religion.

## Archaeology and Criticism

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The results of archaeological excavation in Palestine have been astonishingly meagre. Most of what has been found is not epigraphic, and even the anepigraphic finds are minor. Monumental buildings and sculpture are rare, except for small statuettes of a generally naked goddess, and a variety of animals. It goes no way to backing up expectations based on the bible, which implies a highly literate country, free of dismal damsel deities, from the supposed time of David around 1000 BC, if not from the supposed time of Moses hundreds of years before that. Biblical expectations led to the devastation of vast acreages of potentially valuable archeological sites if properly studied. The objective of generations of biblical archaeologists was to uphold the bible, and when their findings did not produce anything remotely resembling the contents of their holy book, the diggers tipped the spoilage into pits and dug elsewhere. Mostly, they made no records of what they had found unless it met their expectations. For many of them it is no different today!

What archaeology did clarify, albeit from excavations elsewhere like Egypt and Babylon not Palestine, was the identity of the *'apiru*, *hapiru*, *habiru*, once assumed from the el Amarna tablets to have been the Hebrews, one of several names for the people whose sacred history the bible purports to describe. Texts unearthed by the archaeologists suggest they were migrants considered by the settled people of the ANE as inferiors, and even as bandits. The word pertains to "crossing" which could simply mean "in transit" but actually seems specifically to refer to crossing the river Euphrates, the great river that separates the Levant from the east. Invaders came from the east! They were the many Aryan tribes of the Eurasian steppes, who moved south past the Aral and Caspian seas, impacting on Mesopotamia and Syria, sometimes as conquerors. For the people to the west of the Euphrates, the invaders came from the east across the river, whether they were the Aryan tribes themselves, or people displaced and pushed ahead of them as refugees. So they were called Habiru, or those from the opposite bank. Maurauders and migrants from Arabia also troubled the Levant and were probably also called Habiru, even though they had not come from across the river, but simply from the same direction as if they had, the east. So, Habiru or Hebrew seems to have gained the meaning of a maurauder or bandit from the east.

Much later, the Persians set up Syria and the Levant as a satrapy called Abarnahara, the "Across the River" of the Old Testament, where *abar* is the same root as *Habiru*, Hebrew and "*nahara*" means "river". This satrapy was "Across the River" from Persia and Babylon, whence its name, and the inhabitants were called Hebrews, "Those Across the River". So, the general name in the second millennium BC for a migrant from the east became the name of the settled people of Abarnahara in Persian times,



and later still was thought to mean the Jews alone when it appeared in their sacred books.

Now Joshua did not come from across the Euphrates, but he came from across the Jordan river in the biblical myth. He *did* come from the east like the Arab migrants, so could have been called *Habiru* in that sense, but he was also a hero of the Jews, one of the nations of Abarnahara, and therefore Hebrew to the Persians, and the Ptolemaic Greeks later. A T Olmstead observed that a Yashuia in the el Amarna letters sounds like Joshua, but no name like Moses appears with him. W F Albright tried to preserve the *Habiru* as the Hebrews by suggesting that the *Habiru* had invaded Palestine before the Israelites. The bible is therefore wrong, and the notion has no archaeological merit. More credible is the hypothesis, understood by Josephus, that the exodus was the expulsion, in the mid-second millennium BC by conventional dating, of the Asian rulers of Egypt—called by the Greeks—the Hyksos. The Jerusalem priests must have known this, as did the Egyptian priests who had used it to source the biblical story, and Josephus was a leading Jew in first century AD Judæa, and must have known what was general knowledge among the aristocracy. So, it would be truer to say that the knowledge of Egyptian history enjoyed by the Egyptian priesthood in the time of the Ptolemies *inspired* the idea of the exodus:

- but the Egyptian rewriters had to work within the parameters already given as the basis of the Jewish sacred history by the Persians, and widely accepted by the Jews, namely, that their ancestors had been in bondage to the Egyptians
- the hegemony of the Asians was not a period the Egyptians wanted to openly acknowledge, and to suggest in a book they were preparing that the Jews had once ruled Egypt could not have been acceptable to them.

To judge from the stories that have come to us from the third century BC, several alternative options were under discussion, but the one now accepted is the one in the *Old Testament*, because it was written into the *Septuagint*. For long, the Hyksos idea was rejected as being incompatible with the Jewish scriptures, because biblicists cannot understand that the bible is not history but sacred history, meaning myth or at best legend. Their God does not do myth, He is the God of History! So, they followed other clues in the myth which were incompatible with the Hyksos hypothesis, but which also was incompatible with the bible's own chronology. Furthermore, these clues suggested the Israelites were slaves under Rameses II, a powerful Pharaoh who conquered Asians rather than letting them run off. Contemporary inscriptions confirm that *'apiru* were used to build Rameses' public buildings. From their records held in their temple's schools of life, the Ptolemaic priests knew of it, and could associate it with the bondage spoken of in the extant Jewish scriptures provided by the Persians. The two stories were therefore amalgamated to yield the exodus. It is more than likely that, when the Seleucids had control of Jerusalem from 200 BC, they made anti-Egyptian changes to the Ptolemaic edition.

The mention of the store cities of Rameses and the archeological confirmation of the role of *'apiru* in building them conspired to make biblicists date the exodus to about 1230 BC. Yet, the Merneptah stele, dated soon after, implied that Israelites who were already in Palestine were wiped out by the Pharaoh—"their seed was no more" (G A Barton 1937, J A Wilson 1950). Biblicists ignore this, and claim the monument as

substantiating the bible. But the reading of the glyphs, though widely accepted, is far from certain, so the discussion of them will continue. Archaeology shows that Canaanite cities were destroyed in the thirteenth century BC, but by whom? Biblicists say, “By Joshua”, but the stele they value so highly says it was Merneptah.

T J Meek (1920) had tried to suggest a two stage settlement of Palestine. Joshua, a leader of the *Habiru*, had crossed the Jordan first to conquer the Canaanites in Israel, then Moses had led a tribe of Levites from Egypt at a much later date, and settled among the *Judahites* of Judah. The Israelite state remained Canaanite, while the small state of Judah adopted the Mosaic law and the holy priesthood of the Levites. It explained that Israel and Judah had profound differences, even in the bible, but confirmed in archaeology. Meek was saying that the Israelites and the Judahites were “two quite different and distinct people, as separate and distinct as the Babylonians and Assyrians”.

Archaeology suggests that Israel was Phœnician in culture, and that is influenced by Egypt, but Judah was a backwater that had retained the influence of the Assyrians. Indeed Judah did not seem to emerge as a separate entity until Samaria was annexed by Assyria. It was a tiny client state of the Assyrian empire, and, not long after fell under the yoke of Babylon, not emerging again until the Persians, under Darius II, set up the temple state of Yehud in 417 BC. Then Judah was turned into being pro-Persian, the Persians being the successors to Assyria in culture, and anti-Egyptian. The continuity of Canaanite culture in Samaria is confirmed by the ubiquitous figurines of the naked goddess, which began to appear in the MBA and remained popular in Israel until its demise.

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## **Dr Michael David Magee**

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Michael D Magee was born in Hunslet, an industrial suburb of Leeds, Yorkshire, in 1941. 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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