

“Much Madness is divinest Sense”

The Economic Consequences of Yahweh’s Parasocial Identity¹

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Abstract

The historical development of Israelite theology must be understood in relation to the social antagonisms that shaped the contexts in which people spoke about God. This article brings recent research on the historical development of different institutional forms in ancient Israelite society into conversation with recent arguments regarding the origins and evolution of the worship of Yahweh in the southern Levant.² My aim is not to reduce theology to an epiphenomenal reflection or a direct expression of social realities, but to grasp it as creatively engaged with such realities. Yahweh appears to have originated among mobile bands on the social and geographical margins with respect to the centers of political and economic power in southwest Asia. Israel’s emergent monarchic state adopted this popular family god as its patron deity. The real social antagonisms between extractive state regimes and sustainable systems of allocation shaped—in various, indirect, and surprising ways—Israel’s speech about God. This article argues that the conflicted historical development of Israel’s speech about Yahweh takes its shape in relation to the evolving social regimes and antagonisms that marked Israel’s history.

Key words

Political Economy; History of Israel; Gods in the Bible

Conflicting Modes of Exchange in the Ancient Sacred Economy

Israel’s economy was neither homogeneous nor coordinated. Difficulties abound for historical approaches to Israel’s economy, not least because our written sources derive from a small part of the economy with strong vested interests in other parts from which we hear little. Yet Roland Boer’s book, *The Sacred Economy of Ancient Israel* (2015), contributes significantly to our understanding of this economy and its internal antagonisms. Boer is not the first to identify heterogeneity in Israel’s economy, but he paints a clearer picture of it as fundamentally split between the

¹ The title comes from Emily Dickinson, “Much Madness is divinest Sense,” in Franklin (1998), #620. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers and to Stephen Young whose suggestions improved this article. Brennan W. Breed contributed significantly to the ideas developed here, and I am deeply grateful to him. I accept full responsibility for any shortcomings, but these ideas emerged out of our shared conversations and owe much to him.

² On the divine name Yahweh, see Römer (2015, 24-34).

competing interests of royal estates versus rural communities. Royal estates depended upon modes of resource extraction that were legitimated in part by religious institutions and theological conceptions. These estates existed alongside rural communities that were rooted in reciprocal relations of allocation, not extraction, and bound together by regulative norms, values, and ideas that, while also theological, nonetheless differed from those that legitimated royal estates. Extractive and allocative forms of social organization often competed with each other, and it is not the case that one (i.e. the state/estate) develops out of the other (i.e. clan/tribal communities).

Kojin Karatani's book, *The Structure of World History* (2014), supplements Boer's analysis with attention to the dominant modes of exchange in these distinct social formations (among others). Karatani's concept of *modes of exchange* expands Marxist analyses of social formations beyond the idea of *modes of production*. From the perspective of modes of exchange, Karatani argues, critics avoid the reductive tendencies of some Marxists to speak of political and cultural forms as merely superstructural epiphenomena expressing base realities determined by control over the means of production.³ Attention to modes of exchange also avoids a corollary danger among those who view social formations from a structuralist perspective. Over the last forty years many sought to avoid reductionism by speaking about the relative or semi-autonomy of various "levels" within a social formation—for example, the political, juridical, ideological—but this can risk isolating one part and neglecting the influence upon it of other realities such as economic forces. For Karatani, modes of exchange provide a framework for analyzing social formations as based on economic conditions of production *and* as shaped by distinct principles of exchange.⁴

Karatani (2014, 5-11) distinguishes four modes of exchange, which he argues coexist in every social formation. Social formations differ on the basis of which mode of exchange is dominant and which are subordinated, to what extent, and how. As Marcel Mauss argued, and much subsequent cultural anthropological work has nuanced and advanced, many archaic societies are grounded in some sense by reciprocal exchanges of gifts and counter-gifts (see Mauss 2002). In capitalist societies, by contrast, commodity exchange becomes the dominant mode of exchange, whereas in non-capitalist states exchange is typically driven by plunder and redistribution of resources extracted through various forms of violent (e.g. booty) and non-violent (e.g. taxation) domination. Karatani (2014, 9, 20-8)

³ "In *Capital*, Marx considered the capitalist economy not only in terms of modes of production but also in terms of commodity exchange—he theorized how the ideological superstructure could be produced from mode of exchange C," that is, commodity exchange (Karatani 2014, x).

⁴ Karatani is not the only one to expand the concept of mode of production. As he notes, criticizing this category has been a prominent trend in poststructuralist philosophy (2014, 312 n.4). Karatani mentions Jean Baudrillard's (1975) rejection of the category as a distorting projection of capitalist economic dynamics onto non-capitalist societies. Closer to Karatani's is Fredric Jameson's expanded conception (1981, 33-58). Boer's work provides another example insofar as he proposes his notion of a "sacred economy" precisely so as to avoid the mistaken tendency to speak about the economic and the religious as separate spheres: "the determining ideological framework ... of this ancient economy was the sacred" (2015, 8). And for Boer, as for many, the concept of mode of production is "defined as a unique combination of economic and social factors" (29). Given this inclusive definition, I think it best to follow Karatani's terminological shift from "production" to "exchange."

associates reciprocal exchange with the Nation, plunder and redistribution with the State, and commodity exchange with Capital (his fourth mode of exchange does not directly concern us). Class assumes different forms within these social formations, and they cannot be adequately grasped without attending to the threat or presence of class divisions as a driving force behind their different forms and the histories of conflict and tensions among them.

By expanding Marxist categories to grasp non-capitalist societies more fully, Karatani's project productively complements Boer's analysis of ancient Israel's economy as characterized by the coexistence of regimes of allocation alongside regimes of accumulation. Boer's regimes are better described as modes of exchange rather than modes of production. Regimes of allocation exist in societies where the communal bonds are primarily based on clan or kinship ties, and exchange primarily occurs on the basis of a principle of reciprocity that can assume the structure of patronage, but not always. Reciprocity does not mean equality, as patronage clearly reveals. In patronage, Boer writes:

The relationship is personalized and customary: I give allegiance and loyalty to my patron, while the patron protects me and ensures that I survive. This may sound reciprocal, an informal contract of sorts between equals, each bringing something to the deal the other needs. Indeed, the ideology of patronage seeks to give that impression, presenting the relationship as reciprocal. Nothing could be farther from the truth, for patronage reminds us that allocatory economic systems are rarely festivals of equality. (2015, 106)

Constructions of gender, and more specifically, subordinations of feminine to masculine genders, often play a significant role in sustaining inequalities in kinship-based and patronage systems of social relations. Clear examples of gendered hierarchies appear in areas such as customary laws concerning property in subsistence-based Israelite communities. And yet, Carol Meyers (1989) and others show how the demands to survive in such communities necessitate much more overlap, equity, and equality between constructed sexes in the routine practices of daily life. In other social formations, especially extractive regimes with clearer class divisions, such indifference among genders disappears. As Boer writes, "among the small ruling class we find much sharper gender apartheid, with clear demarcations between phallogocratic males and passive females" (2016, 190). While women have relatively higher status in non-urban regimes of allocation, the reciprocal exchange that binds their social relations still involves forces of compulsion and obligation that are unequally distributed between the sexes, as is paradigmatically evident in marriage practices.

Karatani (2014, 31-49) strongly differentiates nomadic bands of hunter-gatherers from more sedentary peoples because the dominant mode of exchange among the former aims at pooling resources and is unconcerned with reciprocity. One finds such a principle of exchange within non-dominant social formations in other modes of exchange as well. Consider families, for example. Familial relations of exchange can involve sharing responsibilities and meals with little concern for reciprocity—from young children, the aged or infirmed, and so on. When relations aimed at pooling that are not governed by reciprocity become dominant within

mobile bands, social ties can be rather fragile. Boer discusses various indications of such fragility within ancient Israelite communities, such as the flexibility of genealogies and the sudden abandonment of settlements.⁵ Karatani notes that clans in fixed settlements where land is less plentiful tend to be bound more tightly together, and they develop capacities for product storage that mitigate risks, but also create new possibilities for social inequalities (32-3, 42-7). Such possibilities for inequality are held in check by a principle of reciprocity. In ancient Israel, a mode of social organization that seems to have combined what Karatani distinguishes as pooling nomads and reciprocal, sedentary groups characterized the subsistence-driven majority of the population.⁶ This is in part because land was plentiful throughout most of Israel's history.⁷

A distinct mode of exchange becomes dominant in temple and palatine estates, states, and colonial powers in ancient southwest Asia. These distinct institutional forms relied on relations of extraction through which producers supported a non-producing class of priests, kings, bureaucrats, and the like. Such extractive regimes are based on the domination of one group over another through which the ruling class mandates tribute payment and various forms of compulsory labor. The literature now preserved in the Bible was almost certainly produced and preserved by literate, trained elites who depended upon the extractive institutions and the modes of regulation legitimating those regimes.⁸ And yet biblical texts do not simply express voices of legitimation. Surely many were often and easily wielded toward such ends, but others sound voices of opposition to such non-reciprocal social relations, preserve traces of alternative modes of social organization, or advocate for more allocative ways of organizing society. In other words, the Bible anthologizes voices that preserve and participate in the economic antagonisms that shaped the social worlds in which they were uttered, written, and deployed. Attending to these socioeconomic formations and their histories puts into relief the intersectional dynamics of class within which the biblical texts and the gods whom they bespeak were embroiled.

Yahweh among Deities and Demons in the Ancient Near East

According to many scholars, divine beings in the ancient Near East are typically dichotomous, tending to assume the form of deities or demons, gods, or monsters (see Smith 2001, 28-33; 2004, 88-101). Hence the title of the major dictionary of divinities in the Bible: *The Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (van der Toorn, Becking, and van der Hoorst 1999). This distinction between these types of divinities corresponds to a geo-spatial division between cultivated, social centers and

⁵ On the malleability of genealogies and families, see Boer (2015, 88-102). On the readiness of villagers to leave their homes, see *ibid.*, 77.

⁶ Boer (2015, 75-8) discusses many reasons why sharp distinctions cannot be drawn between nomadic and sedentary formations without misunderstanding ancient Israel.

⁷ The exception that proves the rule is the Iron II period, as pointed out by Chaney (2016, 140): "Population pressure on arable land was a reality in Iron II Palestine." Chaney cites, Noll (2013, 262): "the Cisjordan Highlands approached a point of full exploitation. That is to say, given ancient farming techniques, the Cisjordan Highlands achieved a population size that was taking advantage of all arable regions."

⁸ See Boer (2015, 31-41), which approaches the maintenance of and crises within socioeconomic formations through *régulation* theory.

uncultivated, deserted peripheries. Deities associated with proximate and inhabited spaces are often benevolent, anthropomorphic, and closely associated with domestic life. They assume emblems of proximate animals such as a bull, calf, bird, or cow. They live on mountains, which are sometimes regarded as gardens, and bestow “blessings of various sorts” (Smith 2001, 30). They enjoy cults that care for them with temples, priests, ritual objects, and practices. Destructive deities, by contrast, are imagined as monsters and demons inhabiting distant, undomesticated spaces such as deserts, wilderness, and wasteland. They live not on mountains but below the surface, in “the underworld or the cosmic ocean” (Smith 2004, 90). Many stories tell of conflicts between these types of deities, such as in the Ugaritic Baal Cycle where Baal battles Death (*Mot*) in the wilderness. Sometimes a deity violates these expectations, but not often.⁹

This distinction and the scholarship that repeats it exemplify the distortions made possible by a neglect of class dynamics. In this case scholars assume that those deities who are depicted as inhabiting wild, uncivilized spaces (and the peoples associated with them and those spaces) were in fact wild and uncivilized. Those who inhabited the urban centers of the states and estates made possible by regimes of extraction clearly depicted them as such, but who were the people(s) who lived outside and were seen as threatening to such centers of “culture” and “civilization”? To those whose gods supported the extractive regimes of states and estates, the divinities associated with and supportive of social formations with alternative modes of exchange surely appeared demonic. Did they look that way to those who worshiped them as participants within their allocative and reciprocal modes of exchange? And would the latter have viewed the so-called gods of states and estates as demonic? After all, what other than a demon would be the appropriate title for the divinity that supports the exploitative practices described in 1 Sam 8:11-18? If we speak about deities versus demons but do not consider the economic interests—that is, the dynamics of class—that inform this distinction in the sources, then we risk uncritically repeating the demonizing ideology that legitimates structures of domination.

So, what type of god is Yahweh? Interestingly, ancient Israel became devoted to a god who appears originally not to have been an Israelite/Canaanite god. The earliest evidence we have for Yahweh is probably found in two Egyptian topographical lists from the New Kingdom period (the sixteenth to the eleventh centuries BCE).¹⁰ The earliest is typically dated to the early fourteenth century BCE. Both refer to “the land of the Shasu of Yhw(h).”¹¹ Even if Yhw(h) is a toponym here,

⁹ This does not include the subordinate divine spirits that a deity may dispatch to execute judgment. Scholars sometimes refer to these as demons since they are at times qualified as evil in Akkadian (e.g., *rābišu*) and Hebrew literature (e.g. *rūah yhw* or *rūah ’elohim*). But at other times such spirits are reckoned good. So, they are intrinsically neutral, but receive a moral valence based on their mission. Thus, they are also distinct from the divinities that dispatch them. Here I am concerned with the latter, which the sources portray in ways that are more explicitly good or evil. On the former, see Kitz (2016).

¹⁰ See also the discussion in Römer (2015, 35-85). Römer’s book appeared after I drafted most of this article. However, I have tried to add references to it throughout since it often buttresses and provides more detail on topics discussed herein.

¹¹ Pharaoh Amenhotep III built a temple in Soleb dedicated to the god Amon-Re in ca. 1400 BCE. Today it is located in Sudan, on the left bank of the Nile about 135 miles south of Wadi-Halfa.

most suspect it was also a divine name. A clear reference to a deity named Yah, likely a shortened version of the name Yahweh, occurs in an Egyptian papyrus from the late fourteenth or early thirteenth centuries BCE (Schneider 2008). The Shasu that the Egyptian inscriptions associate with Yhw(h) appear in many New Kingdom texts. Shasu is not an ethnic term but instead refers to a variety of peoples in various places, but often appear to be semi-nomadic and closely associated with Syro-Palestinian desert regions (Römer 2015, 38-40). The Egyptians were primarily concerned with the Shasu's disruptions of their military and trade routes into Syria-Palestine and Arabia.¹² However, Egyptians apparently had little interest in the desert god of these nomadic peoples. Even though Egyptian religion was highly syncretistic—that is, it tended to merge and integrate the gods, myths, and practices of other peoples into its own religious realm—there is no evidence that Yahweh was ever incorporated into Egyptian pantheons. Surprisingly, this insignificant deity is likely a convenient form of the national god of Israel some hundreds of years later.

Biblical texts appear to remember that Israel's national deity came from these dangerous desert regions (Römer 2015, 40-8). In the biblical story of the exodus, Moses requests that Pharaoh let the Hebrews go worship Yahweh *in the desert*, and Pharaoh responds: "Who is Yahweh that I should obey his voice to let Israel go? I do not know Yahweh, and besides, I will not let the Israelites go" (Exod. 5:2). Like the Shasu, Yahweh becomes known to the Egyptians through demonic disruptions of their society—in the plagues. Numerous texts connect the emergence of Israel as a people to the Midianites, Edomites, and the regions they inhabited in the southern Levant.¹³ Moses weds a Midianite woman, the daughter of a Midianite priest, and he learns about the God Yahweh in Midian (Exod. 3). He then leads the Israelites out of Egypt, back to the mountain in Midian where he previously lived. Although considerable debate now exists about the dating of these texts, in four poetic passages that some judge as among the most ancient texts in the Hebrew Bible, Yahweh is said to bring disruptions and plagues and is closely associated with precisely these areas in and just north of the Arabian Peninsula.¹⁴ The Song of Deborah declares:

when you went out from Seir,
when you marched from the region of Edom ...
The mountains quaked in the presence of Yahweh, the one of Sinai,
in the presence of Yahweh, the God of Israel. (Judg. 5:4-5)

Amarah-West, also located in Sudan, was built by Rameses II in the thirteenth century BCE and has massive topographical lists inscribed in it. The section with the reference to "the land of the Shasu of Yhw(h)" was likely copied from the earlier list at Soleb.

¹² See various scenes from Merneptah's battle reliefs in the Karnak Temple. Also Gottwald (1974, esp. 247-51).

¹³ The ensuing argument closely follows the so-called "Midianite-Kenite Hypothesis." See Cross (1973); Gottwald (1974); Stager (1998); Blenkinsopp (2008); Römer (2015, 35-85).

¹⁴ The classical, linguistic arguments about dating can be found in Cross and Freedman (1997). Proposals now exist to date some of these texts as late as the Hellenistic period. A representative discussion of Judges 5 can be found in Levin (2003, 121-41). A case for a late date for these texts can be found in Pfeiffer (2005). As Römer (2015) argues, even if these texts did not take their final literary shape until the post-exilic period, their grammatical difficulties and complexities suggest that they are not late inventions but likely derive from traditions that existed earlier in Iron II (i.e. 1000–586 BCE).

And introducing the Blessing of Moses:

Yahweh came from Sinai,
and dawned from Seir upon us;
he shone forth from Mount Paran. (Deut. 33:2)

In the Song of Habakkuk:

God came from Teman,
the Holy One from Mount Paran. (*selah*)
His glory covered the heavens,
and the earth was full of his praise.
The brightness was like the sun;
rays came forth from his hand,
where his power lay hidden.
Before him went pestilence (*Deber*),
and plague (*Rešep*) followed close behind.
He stopped and shook the earth;
he looked and made the nations tremble. ...
I saw the tents of Cushan under affliction;
the tent-curtains of the land of Midian trembled. (Hab. 3:3-7)

Finally, in the Psalms:

O God, when you went out before your people,
when you marched through the desert (*selah*),
the land trembled, even the skies poured,
at the presence of God, the one of Sinai,
at the presence of God, the god of Israel. (Ps. 68:8-9 [Eng. vv. 7-8])

Psalm 68 is in the middle of the so-called Elohistic Psalter (Pss 42-83), and the last line in this quotation suggests that an editor has replaced Yahweh with Elohim despite the awkward repetition, which is absent from the nearly identical line quoted above in Judg. 5:5 (Romer 2015, 41-2). Regardless, the idea that Israel's God comes from the desert is clear. As Frank Moore Cross (1998, 66) writes, "The archaic hymns of Israel are of one voice: Yahweh came from Teman, Mt. Paran, Midian, and Cushan," all non-Israelite lands east of the Sinai, in the Arabian Peninsula (see also Isa. 63:1-2).¹⁵ Finally, recent archaeological discoveries dated around 800 BCE from Kuntillet Ajrud, a pilgrimage shrine in the northern Sinai, provide non-biblical inscriptional evidence that also associates Yahweh with these desert regions.¹⁶ The accumulated evidence suggests that Yahweh emerges among semi-nomadic desert dwellers in the southern Levant in the latter half of the Bronze Age. Only centuries later was Yahweh adopted by the emerging Israelite people, a distinct and relatively sedentary group dwelling hundreds of kilometers to the north. It is a historical oddity in the ancient world that a more sedentary group, in this case the inhabitants of the

¹⁵ Kelley (2009, 274) offers a new synthesis of the data to argue that Yahweh and the Edomite god Qos "both originated in the south [and] were worshipped together as deity and divine symbol."

¹⁶ They refer to "Yahweh of Samaria and his Asherah," as well as "Yahweh of Teman and his Asherah." According to Blenkinsopp (2008, 138), "Teman is closely associated with Edom/Seir."

central highlands in Canaan would adopt a deity who is absent from their immediate neighbors' pantheons. Even still, the texts suggest that Yahweh's origins were not forgotten.

Yahweh's Introduction to the Israelites

Although the paucity of evidence makes any attempt at explanation speculative, the best account of how Yahweh became Israel's god remains what scholars call the Midianite-Kenite hypothesis. This hypothesis begins with the texts mentioned above that connect early Israel to the peoples living in the southern Levant. The Kenites were a branch of the Midianites to which Moses' father-in-law belonged, according to Judges (1:16; 4:11), where he is named Hobab. In Exodus his name is Jethro, he is described as a Midianite priest (2:16; 3:1; 18:1), and he is depicted as worshipping Yahweh (18:10-12). On this account, Yahweh likely entered the Israelites' pantheon by way of some figure (such as Moses is depicted) who was connected to the Midianites and/or Kenites and migrated north into Canaanite territories. The archaeological record is clear, however, that the Israelites were Canaanites, not outsiders, so we should not imagine that the Israelites brought Yahweh-worship into Canaan from outside.¹⁷ Instead it seems more likely that semi-nomadic Kenites and/or the Midianites brought knowledge of the deity Yahweh to those Canaanites who would later assume the cult of Yahweh (Toorn 1999, 912). We do not know what attracted these Canaanites to this deity. But if their knowledge of Yahweh included any account of this deity as a god preferentially disposed to act for the liberation of oppressed peoples exploited by the extractive regimes of (e)states, such as is now idealized in the later literary account of Moses and the exodus from Egypt, then what we can reconstruct about early Israel's socioeconomic organization resonates deeply with such a deity.

The Merneptah stela, which is the earliest attestation to Israel's existence in Canaan, indicates that Egypt viewed the Israelites with hostility as Egypt fought for imperial control over Palestine in the late thirteenth and into the twelfth centuries (Killebrew 2005, 51-92). The stela attests to one of what was likely more than one case where the Israelites engaged the Egyptians in military conflict. So the beginning of Israel's emergence in the central highlands occurs amidst hostilities from both the Egyptian empire and from the Canaanite and Philistine city-states in the resource-rich, lowland regions, which were often Egypt's vassals (Gottwald 2001, 166-7).

If the hymns cited above preserve ancient memories or are archaic, then they provide early evidence closely associating Yahweh with destruction, chaos, wilderness, and death. In Habakkuk 3, Yahweh disturbs natural and social spaces:

Before him went pestilence (*Deber*),
and plague (*Rešep*) followed close behind.
He stopped and shook the earth;
he looked and made the nations tremble. ...
I saw the tents of Cushan under affliction;

¹⁷ For example, Dever (2002, 99) states that there is "overwhelming archaeological evidence today of largely indigenous origins for early Israel"; Killebrew (2005, 96) suggests that "early Israel consisted largely of indigenous Canaanites."

the tent-curtains of the land of Midian trembled. (vv. 5-7)

According to Judg. 5:5, “the mountains quaked” when Yahweh appeared.¹⁸ In the plagues, Yahweh disrupts Egyptian society, leaving “no house that was without death there” (Exod. 12:30). In one of the Hebrew Bible’s oddest texts, Yahweh even tries to kill Moses as he follows Yahweh’s call to go to Egypt. Moses is apparently saved by his Midianite wife’s quick thinking to circumcise their son (Exod. 4:24-6).¹⁹ When Moses and Aaron first ask Pharaoh to let the Hebrew slaves go worship Yahweh in the desert, they say that if he does not, then Yahweh our God “will fall upon us with pestilence or sword” (Exod. 5:3). After the exodus, in the first speech after they arrive at Mt. Sinai, Yahweh says to Israel, “You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself” (Exod. 19:4). Note that Yahweh says, “I brought you,” not to Sinai, but “to myself.”²⁰ Yahweh is a pestilent, desert-dwelling deity whom Moses warningly characterizes in Deuteronomy as “a devouring fire” (Deut. 4:24).

Prophets from the eighth to the sixth centuries BCE continue to speak of Yahweh as located in the wilderness (e.g. Hos. 2:14; Jer. 31:2). Other texts in the Second Temple period closely associate Yahweh with wild and monstrous animals. For example, in the whirlwind speeches in Job (39-41), God celebrates Leviathan and Behemoth, calling Behemoth the first or pinnacle of creation (40:19), and Yahweh lingers in fascination over the ostrich (39:13-18) (Doak 2014). According to Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger, “the ostrich ... represents not only a deserted, dangerous and sinister world ... but also a numinous power that commands respect and honor because it can survive mysteriously at the edge of hospitable land” (1998, 182; also 141-52, 182-94). Brian Doak adds, “associations between deities and ostriches in the desert regions near Israel/Palestine persisted for many centuries” (2014, 212). Several prophetic texts associate the presence of ostriches with Yahweh’s promise to transform inhabited cities into undomesticated spaces—e.g. Babylon in Isa. 13:21 and Jer. 50:39; and Edom in Isa. 34:13. In other poetic texts, ostriches simply signify wilderness areas (e.g. Isa 43:20; Lam. 4:3).

Various texts from different periods attest to Yahweh’s distinct propensity to bring plagues that disrupt a social order’s sacred canopy. In Gen. 12:17 and Exodus 7-12, Yahweh brings plagues on Egypt that punish Pharaoh’s regime for extracting what it should not.²¹ Thomas Römer recently made a speculative but suggestive case that Yahweh may have early ties to the Egyptian god Seth, “a god of limits and boundaries, dwelling in the mountains, deserts, and oases ... He thus symbolizes disorder, chaos, the state opposed to the condition of *mə’t* [*maat*]” (2015, 48-9). In Amos 4:6-11, Yahweh claims to have brought plagues on Israel “in the manner of Egypt” (4:10) because Israel acted like Egypt by “oppressing the poor and crushing the needy” (4:1). Yahweh consequently promises to remove Israel from their

¹⁸ I do not mean to suggest that these characteristics are unique to Yahweh or that they only characterize so-called “demons,” but that these texts depict Yahweh in ways that are characteristic of threatening demons according to those living within regimes of extraction.

¹⁹ For discussions of this text, see Propp (1999, 233-8); Graybill (2016, 23-46).

²⁰ Walter Brueggemann, personal correspondence.

²¹ That Abram in the Genesis story willingly contributes to Pharaoh’s excessive desire to acquire what he should not does not mitigate the fact that Yahweh brings plagues to punish Pharaoh’s Egypt after the acquisition of Sarai.

fortified cities (4:3). In such texts, Yahweh's plagues are not capricious disruptions of unspecified social organizations; they target particular social formations because of their exploitative practices of extraction. According to the prophet Hosea, Yahweh summons the Canaanite deity of the underworld known as Death (*Mot*) to say, "*Mot*, I will be your plagues; Sheol, I will be your destruction. Compassion is hidden from my eyes" (Hos. 13:14).²² Such texts do not depict Yahweh as a supreme deity bestowing blessings of well-ordered life, lasting peace and security from a sacred realm. Instead, Yahweh disrupts the social orders of settled, urban life by attacking the institutions that depend upon the exploitation of others, and by siding with those who are so exploited.

The ruling classes in the estate and imperial systems associated such destruction and threats to civilized life with malevolent, destructive demons and their human counterparts—that is, those who could not be drawn away from their subsistence-based, allocative regimes into the extractive (e)state system. Boer (2015, 125) discusses many different types of texts across ancient southwest Asia that discuss these opponents of the ruling classes. He cites the following early second millennium Sumerian text:

He is dressed in sheepskins;
He lives in tents in wind and rain;
He doesn't offer sacrifices.
Armed [vagabond] in the steppe,
He digs up truffles and is restless.
He eats raw meat, lives his life without a home,
and, when he dies, he is not buried according to proper rituals.²³

Boer comments:

The despicable rural laborers also appear as dangerous and barbaric "nomads," always marauding, always threatening the power of the monarch in question, given archaic names (like "Gutian") that indicated time stood still among them. Given that village-based peasants were seminomadic, and that the nomads themselves often settled for a while (for lambing season, or to harvest a crop sown), here again is a ruling-class characterization of the rural workers. These characterizations applied just as much to the outlying nomads with economic grudges as to the taciturn farmers who were forced to work on the hinterland estates or pay taxes from the nearby villages. (2015, 125-6)

Although not consistently, biblical texts persistently portray Yahweh as a divine counterpart to such "despicable rural laborers."

²² Modern translations tend to render the first two clauses as questions, but the ancient versions more often read the first word in each clause as derived from the verb "to be" (*hyh*). For the ancient versions, see Wolff (1974, 221).

²³ For the text, Boer cites Mieroop (1997, 43).

Israel's Odd Patronage of a Parasocial Divinity

Why might this kind of desert demon deity become popular among a group of Canaanites who distinguished themselves from other Canaanites and emerged in the central highland area of Palestine in the early Iron Age? To my mind, two factors are, critically important. First, Israel was a relative latecomer on the scene of distinct peoples inhabiting their region of ancient southwest Asia. From what we can reconstruct, their early mode of political and socioeconomic organization stands out among their neighbors. To be sure, subsistence-based, allocative communities remained the prime form of social organization for most people in this region throughout this historical period. Here I am referring to what appears to be an early form of their dominant political organization, and how it differs from their contemporaries' extractive regimes.²⁴ Early Israel's odd mode of social organization and economic exchange make it distinctively suited for the adoption of a foreign, demon deity that was associated with a less extractive mode of exchange.²⁵

Although the material remains are not homogeneous, early Israel appears to have maintained non-monarchical, reciprocal social structures in small, acephalous agrarian communes (Gottwald 2001, 170-2). Their undecorated, drably functional pottery markedly contrasts with their Philistine and Phoenician neighbors.²⁶ The archaeological record from many sites suggests houses were roughly equal in size.²⁷ Their design, known as the "pillared" or "four-room house," displays no obvious hierarchical arrangement. Although the archaeological record cannot directly inform us about class dynamics since it is silent about social relations, the data remain important (Boer 2015, 122 n.34). They suggest that the early devotees of Yahweh divided land into roughly equal proportions and shared access to the productive elements and technologies of the economy. Furthermore, numerous

²⁴ Although there is good reason to speak of the Iron II Israelites as a distinct people in the central highlands continuous with early Israel (Miller 2004), premonarchic Israelite territories were not likely coordinated in a homogeneous political organization. Some regional differences appear in the archaeological record, on which see Meyers (2001). Although Meyers provides evidence for such heterogeneity, she still shows that the region on the whole displays a consistent tendency toward lateral power relations rather than a top-down, hierarchical model.

²⁵ A similar perspective on Israel's early social formation "as a form of political resistance" can be found already in Gottwald (1974, 240).

²⁶ See, for example, King and Stager (2001, 139): "the Philistines produced, from local clays in Canaan, pottery types that closely resembled their earlier prototypes in their original homeland—somewhere in the Mycenaean world. These vessels included an Aegean-style cooking jug with one handle, craters decorated with water bird and geometric designs in black paint, stirrup jars, large and small bell-shaped bowls, and carinated dishes ... They painted their geometric and animal motifs in both red and black paint ..."

Meanwhile, in the highlands the Israelites were using relatively few ceramic forms in their small agrarian communities: two-handled cooking pots with triangular or flanged rims, collared-rim store jars (or pithoi), and undecorated bowls and juglets.

By about 1000 B.C.E. or earlier, a new fashion in pottery began to appear, first in coastal communities in Phoenicia and Philistia: red-slipped and hand-burnished pottery in the form of bowls and jugs. Clearly the potters were trying to imitate in clay the more luxurious copper and bronze vessels of their day."

²⁷ For a study of different zones of habitation from the early Iron Age in the central highlands, see Miller (2005). Some evidence may indicate social stratification such as defensive fortifications, domestic structures in central towns that are larger than those in more peripheral villages, and some weaponry and luxury items. Even still, there are no large urban sites in this region during this period, and numerous sites provide little or no evidence of such wealth differentials.

laws, especially those regarding care for migrant aliens and special protections for the poor and vulnerable, sound peculiar when compared with laws of other peoples across southwest Asia.²⁸ While one finds concerns for protecting the vulnerable from oppression in the prologue and epilogue to Hammurapi's legal collection, for example, the laws do not in quality or quantity match the concrete benefits stipulated on their behalf in the Hebrew Bible. And whereas the more contemporaneous Greek laws from Crete and Athens stipulate some rights for non-citizens, they also exclude aliens from political rights and treat them as second-class citizens. This relative status is quite measurable in the case of rape in Cretan laws, for example, where the fine for raping a free non-citizen is a meager ten percent of the fine for raping a free person (Willetts 1967, 10). Laws in the Bible are not consistent or uniform in their treatment of resident aliens and other vulnerable persons. While some exclude them from rights granted to citizens, no other ancient laws protect and provide for aliens to the extent found in biblical passages such as Lev. 19:33-34, Num. 15:13-16, or Deut. 10:17-19, 24:10-22. Other texts portray the Israelites as aliens residing in a foreign land (see Gen. 15:13; Lev. 25:23; Ps. 119:19), and many laws are grounded in Israel's experience as a resident alien in Egypt (e.g. Exod. 22:20).

My point here is not to suggest (or deny) that biblical laws encode altruistic values. Boer's work demonstrates the ubiquitous need for labor among ancient kinship-households. So, welcoming and protecting aliens could have served the community's interests—though, to be fair, the texts never suggest that such provisions were conditioned by an alien's capacity for labor. Boer also shows that “allocatory language begins to be deployed to justify extractive policies” in ancient legal collections (2015, 138). In the context of extractive regimes, laws protecting the vulnerable can function like a safety valve and a legitimating force. But this does not determine how they functioned in alternative social orders such as the allocative regime of the kinship-household. Such odd architectural and legal characteristics are markedly different from the extractive regimes that characterized the surrounding Iron Age city-states, including the estates that arose in Israel. These social characteristics supply important data for considering why Israel adopted from nomadic, anti-statist, desert peoples an obscure foreign deity worshipped by no one else in the region.

A second factor contributes to our understanding of why a divinity who appears to have been originally associated with nomadic bands outside a state-estate system might have emerged as the patron deity of the Israelites. Namely, landless, parasocial characters and groups play a significant role in their stories about their early years. “Parasocial” is a sociological term first used by Michael Rowton to describe uprooted peoples that emerge out of the interactions between nomadic or semi-nomadic groups and urban, sedentary peoples (Rowton 1977).²⁹ “Para-” thus

²⁸ A recent accessible discussion of this aspect of biblical laws in relation to the laws of Israel's neighbors can be found in Unterman (2017).

²⁹ As noted by Doak (2011, 13 n.31), this article is Rowton's “thirteenth in a series of sixteen essays exploring the issue of dimorphism and the interaction between tribal and urban society in the ancient Near East ... The viability of Rowton's characterization of the ‘parasocial element’ has been affirmed more recently by J.D. Schloen in ‘The Exile of Disinherited Kin in *KTU* 1.12 and *KTU* 1.23,’ *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 52 (1993), 210, though there have been very few studies

designates that such peoples are both peripheral to and intermediate between sedentary and non-sedentary social groups. Doak adds, “In the spirit of the Greek *παρα*, we may also invest the term ‘parasocial’ with another nuance ... *para*- can denote a person or direction from which action proceeds, or indicate one who originates or directs social change” (2011, 14). Doak’s article shows that numerous stories about Israel’s early years depict groups that fit Rowton’s definition of parasocial. They portray bands of people who are uprooted from the land, excluded from patrimonial authority held by families in tribalized and urban social structures, and yet function as significant agents of social, cultural, and political influence in Israel’s emergence as a distinct people. Although not part of the texts that Doak considers, throughout the Torah and beyond Israel consistently depicts their ancestors as wandering, landless peoples.³⁰ If parasocial elements played an important role in Israel’s emergence, then Yahweh’s emerging popularity in Israel may result in part from Yahweh’s early ties to parasocial groups and the destabilizing, transformative violence with which they are associated in both historical and anthropological analyses.

Again, however, we must be clear: from what perspective are such groups seen as violent and destabilizing? And again the answer is, from the perspective of the ruling classes who perennially sought more labor for their estate systems and perceived those outside the system as resistant or threatening. Habiru is the term found in the Amarna correspondence for such parasocial threats. The term has come to designate “anyone who has simply slipped away from the burdens of estate life, or any group or village that has felt the hot breath of an uncomfortably close power center (with its demands for taxation in labor or in produce)” (Boer 2015, 131). A significant portion of the Amarna letters come from Rib-Adda, king of the coastal city of Byblos, and are written to Pharaoh “in the early fourteenth century when Egypt controlled the Syro-Palestinian area through a system of vassals” (Liverani 2004, 97). In his analysis of how Rib-Adda’s letters fashion the author’s identity as a “righteous sufferer,” faithful to his lord—that is, Pharaoh, threatened on all sides, and thus in need of aid—Mario Liverani shows how the term “habiru” gets used to designate any perpetrator of hostility against Rib-Adda and, by extension, Pharaoh and Egypt. As Liverani writes, “almost always the hostile action is that of ‘taking cities’ at Rib-Adda’s expense ... and always by the *habirus*” (103).³¹ From the perspective of the (e)state systems managed by Pharaoh and his vassals, such

that use Rowton’s terminology for understanding biblical texts.” Doak’s article, from which I draw extensively in this paragraph, is an important exception.

³⁰ For example, Israel traces their history back to Abram who, like his father Terah and his offspring, settled for periods in places and then migrated elsewhere (see Gen 11:31; 12:4-9; and the passages that describe them as “wandering Arameans,” e.g. Deut. 26:5; Josh. 24:2-4); Israel remembers prolonged periods of wandering in the wilderness at the time of their formation as a people (see Exod. 15:22-19:2; Num. 10:11-33:49); and finally, with an eye toward the period when these texts were probably compiled into forms closer to how we find them now, the most significant event for the Hebrew Bible is the loss of land and subsequent dispersion of the Judahites after the disasters of Neo-Babylonian destructions in the early sixth century BCE.

³¹ Liverani attends to the letters’ literary and motivational characteristics. They clearly do not simply report the “facts on the ground,” but that does not mitigate the real threat that they indicate that these groups, which are loosely labeled *habirus* (or *apirus*), posed to state power. In extremis, Rib-Adda pleads with Pharaoh to send troops or risk ceding all Asia to these parasocial enemies: “If within this year the archers do not come out, all the lands will go over to the *habirus*’ (EA 77:26-30)” (Liverani 2004, 115).

elements posed significant threats and were often responsible for the destruction of—whether by outright violence or by luring laborers away from—palatine and plunder regimes. Those who joined such groups may have been relieved from their debts, reunited with their bonded friends and family, or otherwise freed from the compulsory demands of life within (e)state systems. More than likely they would not have shared the state’s view of their social aims and organization.

The term “parasocial” should not suggest that there is a dominant social formation, plus fringe parasocial elements. As Boer argues, parasocial groups were the large majority throughout this historical period—he suggests up to ninety percent of the population. Despite this potentially misleading connotation, the term remains useful because it captures the hybrid character of these social formations as they bring together the characteristics that Karatani distinguishes between pooling bands of nomads and reciprocally related, sedentary clans.

Pantheon Reduction and Parasocial Repression

By the time of early Iron Age II, Yahweh had become the most popular god in Israelite territories.³² Contrary to common misconceptions about ancient Israel’s monotheism, biblical texts indicate that early Israelite theologies began with a robust pantheon of gods, which over time was sharply reduced.³³ By the ninth century BCE, both textual and material sources, including inscriptional and onomastic evidence, attest that Yahweh began to replace El as the principle popular deity of the Israelite inhabitants of Palestine’s central highlands.³⁴ In a process that now has achieved a general consensus among scholars, Yahweh seems to have developed over time from a warrior god, associated with various places (as attested by Kuntillet Ajrud) and not particularly unified in his traits, into a chief deity, identified with El, with Asherah as his consort. Israel underwent a pantheon reduction as various gods were subordinated to Yahweh and even dropped out of usage. Yahweh in turn absorbs the language and characteristics associated with these other deities (Smith 2014, 11; also 2002).

Such pantheon reduction is not at all unique to Israel.³⁵ Pantheon reduction was actually pandemic in the Iron Age. After comparing onomastic evidence from ancient Israel and neighboring peoples, Seth Sanders concludes: “But if prominence of a single god at the expense of diversity is a mark of ‘monotheism’ (more accurately, pantheon reduction), it turns out that Israel and Judah were by no means the most nominally monotheistic Iron Age Levantine culture” (2014, 224). According to Mark Smith, “In both Assyria and Babylonia, texts emerge showing what is called above a “one-deity discourse” (2014, 12). For example, the Babylonian *Enuma Elish* ends with the ascendancy of Marduk to the status of chief

³² As classically argued by Tigay (1986). See also the critical discussion of Tigay’s and subsequent work on the onomastic evidence by Sanders (2014).

³³ For example, Botéro (2001, 207): “Unlike the Mesopotamians and alone among all other peoples around them, Semites and non-Semites alike, the Israelites were resolutely *not* polytheistic but recognized only a single god, Yahweh” (italics in original).

³⁴ For a discussion of the evidence, see Sanders (2015).

³⁵ According to Smith (2014, 11), “The one feature that seems common to the larger international discussion is a particular focus on a single deity, or what we may call a one-god or one-goddess vision of reality.”

among the gods who, in the end, are reduced to different names of Marduk: “He is the sum of divinity relative to them” (13).

Although pantheon reduction is not unique to Israel, the type and consequences of Israel’s pantheon reduction appear distinct. “Only in Hebrew is the dynastic god identical with the most popular kin-god” (Sanders 2015, 67). Royal dynasties in other surrounding peoples also privileged a single deity, but only in Israel and Judah is the dominant dynastic god the dominant family god. Unlike their neighbors, Israelite rulers “chose as their dynastic god one already strongly associated with the group they intended to rule” (81). Israel’s royal patrons assume a deity closely associated with kinship-based social formations outside the state, and then develop Yahwistic cults that associate Yahweh with mountains (e.g., Zion), provide Yahweh with temples, and remember Yahweh for bestowing blessing and ensuring social well-being. As one might imagine in light of the above discussion, this metamorphosis often involves explicit attempts to domesticate the power and freedom of an unpredictable, originally parasocial divinity (see, for example, 2 Sam. 7:1-7; 1 Kgs 8:12-61).

Numerous texts depict Yahweh supporting and blessing Israel’s and Judah’s extractive state regimes. In addition to many pro-royal texts such as the “Songs of Zion” in the Psalter, 2 Kings 22-23 is interesting because it portrays the expansion and centralization of state power as a matter of following Yahweh’s law (Römer 2015, 191-209). King Josiah of Judah tears down altars and destroys ritual objects to eliminate various forms of divination, especially those closely tied to astral cultic worship of “the sun, the moon, and the stars” (23:5). Such reforms have typically been viewed as a pivotal moment in biblical monotheism’s universalization of divinity into an abstract, singular principle.³⁶ Assessments have tended to celebrate or vilify these acts as an instance of heightened universality and abstraction.³⁷ Scholars have been less attentive, however, to the fact that these efforts also involve a constriction of the sacred and the constitution of non-sacred domains in religious, social, and political life. From the perspective of those within the palatine estate whose power these measures function to consolidate, Josiah’s iconoclasm disenchanting these social institutions that may have been beyond state control because it was driven not by the idea that they were demonic, but by efforts aimed at de-sacralizing them.

As scholars have noted for centuries, Josiah’s political, economic, and religious reforms share many of the values and ideas that are peculiar to laws in the

³⁶ Consider, for example, the sentiment of Botéro (2001, 42): “Religious sentiment is not necessarily monotheistically inclined ... But there can be no question that such a sentiment is more easily satisfied when that sacred Order-of-Things is in fact represented by a single subject and partner: the religious spirit more easily relates to *one* ‘being opposite’ ... than to a whole group of figures, a plurality, an uncertain mixture or a vague Force.” Texts such as Psalm 82 seem to exemplify and justify this view. It narrates the deaths of other gods who are made mortal because they have failed to keep justice, and the consequent ascendancy of Israel’s God who becomes the single judge responsible for all nations.

³⁷ Examples of celebrations can be found in prominent nineteenth century works such as Kuenen (1882); Pfeleiderer (1894). From the mid-twentieth century, see Irwin (1946). Vilifications appear in more recent scholarship, such as Schwartz (1997); Assman (2010). For an historical account of the idea of religion that attends to the role of monotheism therein, see Masuzawa (2002).

book of Deuteronomy. Joseph Blenkinsopp, among others, has given considerable attention to how Deuteronomy's laws consolidate state power by undermining clan-based kinship ties (see especially Blenkinsopp 1997, 88-92):

A degree of political and economic centralization is an inevitable concomitant of statehood and can be expected to generate resentment at the local level ... In the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, however, state centralization implied a deliberate policy of redirecting allegiance from the lineage to the state and to that extent undermining the kinship structure, especially at the level of the clan. (88)

For Blenkinsopp, Deuteronomic law undermines the power of local organizations of labor and allocative practices beyond the purview of the ruling class, efforts which have their positive counterpart in various measures that centralize and expand the wealth and power of the state. Deuteronomy attests to various legal means by which the ruling classes used the state to support a new or, in the context of Josiah, a reformed extractive regime beyond the control of local clan leaders.

Walter Brueggemann approaches Deuteronomy from a different perspective and arrives at a very different evaluation:

The material in Deuteronomy roughly divides into sermonic exhortations and commandments. The negative target of both sermons and commandments is "Canaanite" seduction that principally concerns debt, the reduction of needy neighbors to indebtedness whereby some acquire powerful leverage against others in the community. The threat of a debt economy is that it sets one class of society against another class and so violates the community of neighborliness to which Israel is committed. (2016, 39-40)

For Brueggemann, Deuteronomy urgently appeals for a transformation of the economy "from one of *predation* to one of *covenantal neighborliness*," that is, from an extractive to an allocative mode of exchange (2016, 35; emphasis original). The disparity between Brueggemann and Blenkinsopp is primarily a matter of perspective rather than a consequence of Deuteronomy's content or of their interpretive practices. Blenkinsopp views Deuteronomy as an index of the shifting mode of exchange as the monarchic state achieves dominance as an institutional form in place of the previously dominant clan-kinship system. Brueggemann, however, approaches to Deuteronomy as a participant within the ongoing class struggle of an allocative regime of "Israelites" against "Canaanite" regimes of extraction, whether ruled by Israel's native elites in the eighth and seventh centuries BCE, or by imperial functionaries in the fifth.³⁸ The question, then, is whether Deuteronomic laws support the interests of extractive or allocative regimes? The answer appears to be both. In addition to the texts that depict Josiah's regime using Deuteronomic laws to shore up state power, other texts from roughly the same time show Jeremiah using Deuteronomic language to attack the royal regime and the

³⁸ For a discussion of similarly different views on cultural objects in relation to class dynamics, see Jameson (1971, 372-82).

(e)state institutions of temple and palace for economic extraction and predatory expropriation, among other things (see, e.g. Jer. 5:26-9; 7:5-10; 22:13-23).³⁹

Whereas Josiah's reforms are depicted as de-sacralizing peripheral social spaces in order to legitimate Jerusalem as the only sacred cultic site, other texts precisely invert this effort by de-sacralizing the centers of royal power to undermine the theological legitimacy of the ruling class. For example, in the narratives about Elijah and Elisha a sacred presence is available to the prophets yet absent from other spheres, including the royal (see 2 Kgs 6:8-23) and the cultic (see 1 Kings 18) (Brueggemann and Hankins 2014). And numerous prophetic critiques of the cult depict God lamenting activities in the temple. Elsewhere in ancient southwest Asia gods complained about their temples being neglected or inadequate, needing attention or repair, but I know of no other cases where deities lament the attention given to them from their own houses of worship!⁴⁰ Yet various prophets report Yahweh's astonishing complaints about cultic acts of devotion. Such complaints can be found, for example, in Samuel (1 Sam. 15:22), Amos (5:21-3; cf. 4:4-5),⁴¹ Hosea (8:13: "Though they offer choice sacrifices ... Yahweh does not accept them"; cf. 6:6; 9:4), and in the following passage from Isaiah:

I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts;
I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats.
When you come to appear before me,
 who asked this from your hand?
Trample my courts no more; bringing offerings is futile;
incense is an abomination to me.
New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation—
 I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity.
Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates;
they have become a burden to me,
 I am weary of bearing them.
When you stretch out your hands,
 I will hide my eyes from you;

³⁹ Much debate exists about the relationship between Jeremiah and Deuteronomic traditions, yet strong affinities exist in their style, vocabulary, and theology, which are especially evident in prose passages such as Jer. 11:1-14. This capacity of a text to contribute to conflicting ends in historical struggles is in principle true of all cultural objects. To judge that a text expresses a reactionary/progressive ideology *in general* would be an idealist conclusion in need of materialist contextualization of the text's function as reactionary/progressive within a concrete historical situation. Even a text that may appear unequivocally to legitimate extractive monarchic ideology—such as a Song of Zion like Psalm 46—can be used in ways that undermine an extractive regime. See Brueggemann (2014, 69-86).

⁴⁰ From Mari, see Archives Royales de Mari (ARM) 26 214, in Nissinen (2003, 48), where a prophetess of Dagan-Milik complains that Zimri-Lim has neglected the deity. In ARM 26 215 (49), Lanašum writes a letter to Zimri-Lim expressing gratitude for an offering and reporting a prophetic oracle in which Dagan complains about a lack of pure water. Lanašum goes on to echo the prophet's request, "let my lord perform the purification offering." From Assyria, in State Archives of Assyria 9 3.5 (122-124), Ištar of Arbela recounts to Esarhaddon all she has done for him, and then asks, "What have [yo]u, in turn, given to me? The [fo]od for the banquet no[t there], as if there were no temple at all! My food is wi[th]e[ld] from me, my drink is with[he]le from me! I am longing for them, I have fixed my eyes upon them."

⁴¹ For the argument that the cultic practices mentioned by Amos reflect pre-exilic and not post-exilic features of the cult, see Hadjiev (2009, 14-15); Barton (2012, 31).

even though you make many prayers, I will not listen;
your hands are full of blood. (Isa. 1:11-15)

Jeremiah warns worshippers at Yahweh's temple in Jerusalem, "Do not trust in these deceptive words: 'the temple of Yahweh, the temple of Yahweh, the temple of Yahweh'" (7:4; see also 7:21-2; 6:20). Yahweh cannot be made present by the cultic spaces and acts carried out in Yahweh's name: "If you truly act justly, one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place" (Jer. 7:5-7). And there is precedent for Yahweh's threats to destroy Yahweh's own temple in the forced migration of Yahweh's worshippers from Shiloh (7:12-15). Apparently, Yahweh is prepared to repeat history.

Returns of Yahweh's Repressed Parasocial Identity

How should we understand this repetition? The texts often speak of it as a matter of Judah repeating Israel's sin, which historians supplement with recourse to Babylonia's repetition of Assyrian aggression. From these perspectives, the problem that leads to the destruction appears to be a matter of distinct yet similar cases, either of sin—Israel's then Judah's—or aggression—Assyrian then Babylonian. The destructions that the prophets anticipate appear to be responses to particular offenses, such as imperial arrogance, unjust rulers, social predation, or other prohibited practices. Surely many texts fit this description. But often the punishments aim at more systemic targets than particular perpetrators or practices. Paradigmatically, Israel remembers Yahweh destroying Yahweh's own sanctuaries in three distinct periods in Israel's pre-exilic history: Shiloh in Iron I (c.1050 BCE), Samaria in Iron II (722 BCE), and Jerusalem in the Neo-Babylonian period (586 BCE).⁴² And at times the solutions, the promised alternative futures, escape any logic of reform. Yahweh destroys the whole sanctuary apparatus not to reform but because Yahweh has another institutional form in mind. In such texts the problems, sentences, and solutions in Israel's history escape the logic of particular offenses and requisite reforms. Instead, Yahweh appears to turn against religious rituals and institutions because they functioned to legitimate extractive practices in institutional forms that separate Yahweh from allocative modes of exchange among more reciprocal, mobile, or peripheral social organizations. In light of Yahweh's early associations with parasocial elements opposed to extractive (e)state regimes, such texts look less like contingent reactions or poetic hyperbole and more like returns of Yahweh's repressed, parasocial identity.

Consider the book of Lamentations. It presents the disaster brought upon Jerusalem by the Babylonians as Yahweh's rejection of "the kingdom and its rulers" (2:2), "all its palaces" and "its strongholds" (2:5), because the ruling classes shed innocent blood (4:13). Because of their sin, "Those who feasted on delicacies perish

⁴² This point does not concern the historical reliability of these destructions but rather their memory. Shiloh's destruction is less attested than the others. Explicit mentions occur only in Jer 7:12, 14; 26:6, 9; and Ps 78:60. However, its status as an Iron I, sacred regional center associated with a major Israelite military defeat is recalled in 1 Sam 4 and appears to be supported by the archaeological record. See Finkelstein (1992, 1072).

in the streets; those who were brought up in purple cling to ash heaps” (4:5). Yahweh annihilates all rituals and institutions through which the ruling classes connected themselves to God: “he has destroyed his tabernacle; Yahweh has abolished in Zion festival and sabbath, and in his fierce indignation has spurned king and priest. Yahweh has scorned his altar, disowned his sanctuary; he has delivered into the hand of the enemy the walls of her palaces” (2:6-7). Astonishingly, the poet claims that Yahweh had long intended to destroy the city (2:17). The book ends with the poet imagining that God has abandoned and might never return to the poet’s community in Jerusalem, at the center of royal power (5:20-2).

In other texts Yahweh appears to react symptomatically in ways that reveal Yahweh’s close ties to peripheral, parasocial groups and their gods. I will mention three. First, in the inaugural service of the Israelite cult, Aaron and his sons officiate for the first time. The service begins successfully: “the glory of Yahweh appeared to all the people. Fire came out from Yahweh and consumed the burnt offering and the fat on the altar” (Lev. 9:23-4). But then it turns tragic when Aaron’s eldest sons offer “strange fire” to Yahweh. “And fire came out from the presence of Yahweh and consumed them and they died before Yahweh” (Lev. 10:2).⁴³ Interpreters variously struggle to make sense of this episode, but it appears that Yahweh reacts rather involuntarily, almost allergically to a new institutional form that ubiquitously supported extractive relations.

Second, when Dathan and Abiram complain about Moses’s leadership,⁴⁴ Moses tells everyone to step away from them; they:

stood at the entrance of their tents, together with their wives, their children, and their little ones. And Moses said, “This is how you shall know that Yahweh has sent me ... if ... the ground opens its mouth and swallows them up ... then you shall know that these men have despised Yahweh.” As soon as he finished speaking all these words, the ground under them was split apart. The earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, along with their households. (Num. 16:27-32).

In the broader Mesopotamian context, this is an event that those yoked to royal estates explicitly associate with demons. According to Assyriologist Hayim Tawil, “In Akkadian texts dealing with demons we learn that demons ... are the children of the netherworld ... ‘always creeping in subterranean crevices’ ... Demons were believed to come out from the netherworld through a crack/hole in the ground (1980, 48).” This story does not link Yahweh’s parasocial identity with disruptions of the ruling class’s attempts to use the state and related institutions to exploit laborers, but it does depict Yahweh reacting in a way that is particularly characteristic of peripheral, “demonic” divinities.

Third, when David entertains the idea of building Yahweh a temple because, he humorously muses, “See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent” (2 Sam. 7:2), Yahweh responds explosively:

⁴³ Hos. 9:4 also mentions sacrifices that defile.

⁴⁴ Namely, that he has “brought us up out of a land flowing with milk and honey [i.e., Egypt!] to kill us in the wilderness” (Num. 16:13).

Are you the one to build me a house to live in? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, “Why have you not built me a house of cedar?” (2 Sam. 7:5-7).

Yahweh then says that David’s son will build a temple, but Yahweh’s initial response is like a pre-reflective outburst expressing the deep sentiments of Yahweh’s primal identity as an uprooted, mobile, tent-dwelling, parasocial deity, which is precisely the identity that this passage threatens to suppress by introducing the new institutional form of a temple.

Still other texts portray Yahweh as remarkably disposed to think and act systemically not only against extractive but on behalf of more allocative modes of exchange. Daniel Smith-Christopher attends to several key texts that are primarily aimed not at the annihilation of the royal (e)state system but rather at the positive reclamation of the land for more allocative social formations (see Isa. 5:17) (Smith-Christopher 2010, 85). For example, the prophet Micah envisions the destruction of the city built by violent exploitation (3:10-11) so that it will be rebuilt as a cultivated field (3:12) where families work their own plots (4:3-4).

As indicated above Yahweh does not always side with allocative against extractive social systems. Many texts—not to mention their uses—depict Yahweh’s capacity for the inverse. My aim is not to align Yahweh with one over or against the other, but to show that the texts reveal insistent efforts at such alignment even as they prove incapable of finally rooting Yahweh’s identity in a single social formation. Yahweh ultimately proves to be “para-” to every social formation, present with but always beside, a force that threatens to expose their antagonisms and explode their settlements. Although I cannot develop the point here, I do not think that Yahweh is therefore associated with the antagonisms of allocative formations in the same way that Yahweh is said to elude extractive regimes. Yahweh seems prone to flee the latter, whereas the former tends to host and bear this divine distance that displaces it from itself. The accuracy and significance of this distinction would be worth exploring.

Conclusion

Any discussion of divine blessing and cursing in the Bible should be specific about the socioeconomic consequences of these acts. What is presented as blessing could, in light of the pressures of class antagonisms, turn out to be rather like cursing since such “blessing” may legitimate exploitation. Alternatively, cursing may turn out to be a rejection of such exploitative “blessing” and even an advocacy for an alternative, less exploitative mode of exchange (e.g., in Mic. 3:9-4:4 and Isa. 5:17, discussed above). Much madness, as Dickinson puts it in the title, can make divinest sense, just as divinest sense can create much madness.

The deity that becomes dominant for king and kin in Israel’s pantheon reduction begins as a parasocial, politically and religiously disruptive advocate for the outsiders to and victims of the extractive regimes of royal states and estates. With

the development of such extractive regimes among the Israelite peoples, Yahweh's will bends through elaborate legal, theological, and religious regulations to support these regimes. Yet this deity continues to oppose and withdraw from institutional forms of social, political, and religious life in ways that delegitimize those spheres as anti-sacred or de-sacralized zones. Such behavior should be understood as an ongoing propensity rooted in Yahweh's initial, parasocial ties to non-extractive regimes of allocation and relations of reciprocity overagainst extractive regimes of accumulation.

We should not, therefore, prioritize Yahweh's governance and then view Yahweh's disruptive capacities as secondary, oppositional, or derivative. On the contrary, Yahweh's allocative propensities remain primary even as Yahweh develops intimate affinities for extraction. Yahweh thus remains parasocial to every social formation, but not equally to each. Yahweh's affinities for extraction and propensities for allocation are not simply opposites in conflict or abstract theological qualities. Both retain internal antagonisms, and the conflicts between these theological tendencies are thoroughly intersected by the alternative socioeconomic modes of exchange and the antagonisms that they manage.

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