

Book Reviews



James S. Anderson

Monotheism and Yahweh's Appropriation of Baal. New York: Bloomsbury, 2015.
Pp. x + 147.

In this revision of his 2011 University of Sheffield dissertation, James S. Anderson analyzes biblical texts that transfer the characteristics and concerns of several ancient Near Eastern gods to Yahweh. He argues convincingly that Israelites and Judahites venerated a small pantheon of gods, whose functions and attributes Yahweh appropriates. This book should prove useful especially to students and scholars looking for a relatively brief yet persuasively argued study of the development of Yahwistic monotheism.

The first chapter outlines two twentieth-century scholarly paradigms for understanding the emergence of monotheism. The early-monotheistic model, associated with Albright, Cross, and Freedman, generally accepts the biblical account of Mosaic monotheism that becomes corrupted as the Israelites encountered Canaanite culture. The native pantheon model, in contrast, argues that “there existed a native Israelite-Judahite pantheon headed by Yahweh and Asherah,” which later collapsed into Yahweh alone (p. 9). Anderson espouses the latter, arguing that the paradigms are mutually exclusive.

Chapter Two names the members of the small biblical early pantheon, including *Yahweh Sabaoth*, “the sons of God,” the divine council, Asherah, and Jeremiah’s Queen of Heaven. The study, which also surveys archeological evidence, is succinct and effective, mixing common observations with exciting readings: for example, “Let us make” in Genesis 1:26 might reflect a divine couple (p. 26). Anderson proposes that non-monotheistic texts survive in the Hebrew Bible because the ancients “held tradition in greater awe than we do” (p. 25). Less compelling is his argument that Second Isaiah cannot be trusted as the radical monotheist that many believe him to be, because “the hyperbolic speech which extols a divinity as the only one occurs in the ancient Near East in contexts where all would have understood that such statements do not literally mean they are actually the only god in the entire divine realm” (p. 29).

If we disbelieve any writer who affirms monotheism, we will certainly reduce the number of strictly monotheistic texts. Anderson is convincing, though, in arguing that scholars who understand Asherah only as a sacred pole, or who dismiss references to other deities as syncretism, “appear motivated by religious suppositions” (p. 37).

According to Anderson, texts that appropriate the domain of other deities and transfer them to Yahweh exist in three categories: explicitly polemical (Psalm 82), implicitly polemical (Zech. 5:5-11), and non-polemical (Psalm 104 presents Yahweh as always having been in control of the sun’s movements; Isa. 44:2 and 46:3 portray Yahweh as responsible for children in the womb, appropriating the domain from Asherah). The very existence of polemical comments demonstrates that Yahweh had not “always been conceptualized as the sole deity” (p. 40); otherwise, polemics would be unnecessary.

Anderson next summarizes Ugaritic texts concerning Baal, the deity subject to the most biblical polemics. He charts storm-god Baal’s evolution from Sumerian and Akkadian gods Ishkur and Adad to the West Semitic or Syrian Hadad, suggesting that Baal likely developed as an epithet (“master” or “lord”) for Hadad that became a proper name. For Anderson, Baal “oscillated between a proper and common noun” between the third and first millennia BCE (p. 48). Biblical authors often blunt the force of “baal” and “asherah” by attaching the definite article or by making them plural. Anderson also observes that the Hebrew Bible’s pairing of Baal with Asherah or Astarte instead of with Anat (as in Ugaritic literature) is polemical.

Chapters Five and Six study appropriation texts, beginning with Gideon’s narrative in Judges 6. Here, Yahweh’s appropriation extends beyond the destruction of Asherah’s tree and Baal’s altar: Yahweh controls fire (though Anderson’s widening of this to include lightening is unexplained), dew, and fertility, all of which are “Baal’s traditional prerogatives” (p. 66). The most in-depth case study concerns the Elijah-Elisha cycle. While some anti-Baal polemics are obvious (1 Kings 18; 2 Kings 1), other examples provided by Anderson seem far-fetched (e.g., “Elisha’s request for a musician in [2 Kings 3:15] recalls a passage from the Story of Aqhat which ‘indicates that music is provided when Baal provides a drink ...’” [p. 72]).

Anderson wisely declines to differentiate strongly between implied polemic and non-polemical texts, giving examples that show Yahweh in command of storms, Mount Zaphon, fertility, healing, and deliverance from the underworld. More briefly discussed are traits belonging to El and Asherah, but this reviewer found the discussion of El and Yahweh in Nahum 1 (p. 94-95) to be muddled. Also, I question if Second Isaiah “indicates that Asherah was still venerated in

Judah during the Persian era” (p. 96) if at least parts of the text were composed in Babylon.

Only in Anderson’s concluding chapter is the question of Yahweh’s native characteristics seriously addressed; Anderson notes that “storm-god imagery corresponds to non-polemical transference, unless for those who composed the poems Yahweh was a storm-god” (p. 86). If many of Yahweh’s traits have been transferred from other deities, what kind of god was Yahweh before the appropriation? Anderson proposes two models: Yahweh as an El-type or as a Baal-type god, though Anderson himself more strongly suspects the former. However, he asserts that “it is next to impossible to draw any firm conclusion regarding Yahweh’s original characterization” (p. 102).

According to Anderson’s reconstruction, the Omrides promoted Yahweh, an outsider god, in order to unite the “patchwork quilt” of Israel’s competing tribes. Later Deuteronomist “ideologues” rewrote Ahab as a Baal supporter, engineering “a Judahite identity” with Jerusalem becoming the “true” heir and guardian of Yahwism (pp. 103, 113-14). Finally, Yahwism does not become “properly monotheistic” until the Persian and Hellenistic eras.

Anderson’s textual analysis is mostly synchronic, which is somewhat surprising for a study of the development of Israelite religion. Could the author of Deuteronomy 32 (p. 25) or 1 Kings 16 (p. 68) know Priestly material in Exodus 6:3? Was Genesis 22 always an implicit polemic against child sacrifice (p. 41)? Could Anderson have plotted chronologically his examples in Chapters Five and Six, since polemics become more explicit over time?

Unfortunately, a number of typographical (“the Yahweh” [p. 25]; “expending” [p. 110]) and other errors remain – as is the case for practically every book. Most egregious are jumbled Hebrew quotations (pp. 26, 52, 74, 95), transliteration errors (p. 57), and misplaced punctuation (pp. 44 n. 28, 52, 59). However, Anderson is witty (e.g., “Golden was the Calf, not the days of the Exodus” [p. 24]), and his breezy yet authoritative style makes the book a pleasure to read and easy to recommend.

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