

Lecture 2 - The Hebrew Bible in Its Ancient Near Eastern Setting: Biblical Religion in Context [September 11, 2006]

Chapter 1. The Bible as a Product of Religious and Cultural Revolution

Professor Christine Hayes: I mentioned in the opening lecture that this course is going to examine the biblical corpus from a variety of different viewpoints and take a variety of approaches, historical, literary, religious, cultural. And today we are going to begin our appraisal of the first portion of the Bible as the product of a religious and cultural revolution. [The Bible is the product of minds that were exposed to and influenced by and reacting to the ideas and cultures of their day.](#) And as I suggested in the opening lecture, comparative study of the literature of the Ancient Near East and the Bible reveals the shared cultural and literary heritage at the same time that it reveals great differences between the two. In the literature of the Bible some members of Israelite society — probably a cultural religious and literary elite — broke radically with the prevailing norms of the day. They mounted a critique of prevailing norms. The persons responsible for the final editing and shaping of the Bible, somewhere from the seventh to the fifth or fourth century BCE — we're not totally sure and we'll talk more about that — those final editors were members of this group. And they had a specific worldview and they imposed that worldview on the older traditions and stories that are found in the Bible. That radical new worldview in the Bible was monotheism. But why, you might ask, should the idea of one God instead of many be so radical? What is so different? What's different about having one God, from having a pantheon of gods headed by a superior god? What is so new and revolutionary about monotheism?

Well according to one school of thought there isn't anything particularly revolutionary about monotheism; and the classical account of the rise of monotheism, that has prevailed for a very long time, runs as follows, and I have a little flow chart here to illustrate it for you. The argument goes that in every society there's a natural progression: a natural progression from polytheism, which is the belief in many gods — usually these are personifications of natural forces — to henotheism — "heno," equals one, god — or monolatry, which is really the worship of one god as supreme over other gods, so not denying the existence of the other gods, ascribing reality to them, but isolating one as a supreme god, and onto monotheism, where essentially one believes only in the reality of one god. And in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries this progression was viewed as an advance, which is not very surprising because the whole theory was put forward by scholars who were basically western monotheists. And these scholars maintained that certain elements of biblical religion represented pure religion, religion evolved to its highest form, no longer tainted by pagan and polytheistic elements of Canaanite religion generally. So applying an evolutionary model to religion carried with it a very clear value judgment. Polytheism was understood as clearly inferior and primitive. Monolatry was an improvement. It was getting better. It was getting closer. But monotheism was judged to be the best and purest form of religion. And at first the great archeological discoveries that I talked about last time in the nineteenth century seemed to support this claim — that Israelite monotheism had evolved from Ancient Near Eastern polytheism. Cuneiform tablets that were inscribed with the great literature of Mesopotamian civilizations were uncovered and when they were deciphered they shed astonishing light on biblical religion. And these discoveries led to a kind of "parallelomania" — that's how it's referred to in the literature. Scholars delighted in pointing out all of the parallels in theme and language and plot and structure between biblical stories and Ancient Near Eastern stories. So more than a thousand years before the Israelite legend of Noah and the ark you have Mesopotamians telling the stories Ziusudra, or in some versions Utnapishtim who also survived a great flood by building an ark on the instruction of a deity, and the flood destroys all life, and he sends out birds to scout out the dry land, and so on. So with parallels like these, it was argued, it was clear that

the religion of the Israelites was not so different from the religions of their polytheistic or pagan neighbors. They also had a creation story. They had a flood story. They did animal sacrifices. They observed purity taboos. Israelite religion was another Ancient Near Eastern religion and they differed from their neighbors only over the number of gods they worshiped: one or many. It was just a more refined, more highly evolved, version of Ancient Near Eastern religion.

Well, this view, this evolutionary view, or evolutionary model, was challenged by man a named Yehezkel Kaufmann in the 1930's. And Kaufman argued that monotheism does not and cannot evolve from polytheism because the two are based on radically divergent worldviews, radically divergent intuitions about reality. And in a multivolume work which was later translated and abridged, and you've got a selection of reading from the translated abridgment, so it's translated by Moshe Greenburg, an abridged version of his massive work *The Religion of Israel* Kaufman asserted that the monotheism of Israel wasn't, it couldn't be, the natural outgrowth of the polytheism of an earlier age. It was a radical break with it. It was a total cultural and religious discontinuity. It was a polemic against polytheism and the pagan worldview. That's implicit, he says, throughout the biblical text. It's been said that Kaufman replaces the evolutionary model with a revolutionary model. This was a revolution not an evolution. Now one advantage of Kaufman's model is that we can avoid some of the pejorative evaluations of polytheism as primitive, as necessarily earlier and primitive and inferior. We're simply positing the existence of two distinct orientations, two divergent worldviews. They each have their explanatory merits and they each have their specific problems and difficulties. It's not to say that Kaufman wasn't clearly judgmental but at least the potential is there for us to understand these as two distinct systems, each again, as I say, with its explanatory merits. But as we'll see some of the things that monotheism solves only invite other sorts of problems that it has to wrestle with throughout its long life.

Now in Kaufman's view the similarities, therefore, between the Israelites and Ancient Near Eastern religion and cultures that everyone was so busily finding and celebrating, these were in the end similarities in form and external structure, appearance. They weren't essential similarities. They differed in content. Sure they both have animal sacrifice. Sure they both have ritual purity laws. Sure they share certain stories and legends. But these have been adopted by the Israelites and transformed, transformed into vehicles that convey the basic ideas of the monotheistic worldview. So a similarity in form doesn't mean a similarity in function; and in this, Kaufman is anticipating arguments made by anthropologists. The ritual cult of the Israelites may look like that of their neighbors but it functioned very differently; its purpose was drastically different from that of Israel's neighbors. The Israelites like their neighbors may have set up a king over themselves. But Israelite monarchy differed from Canaanite monarchy in significant ways because of their monotheism. These are all things we will test and explore. So the meaning and function of Israel's cult, of Israel's king, of its creation stories or any of its other narratives — they derive from the place of those items within the larger cultural framework or worldview of Israel and that larger framework or worldview is one of basic monotheism.

Chapter 2. Kaufman's Characterization of "Pagan Religion"

So let's turn then to Kaufman's description of the fundamental distinction between the polytheistic worldview and the revolutionary monotheistic worldview that took root in Israel. And I am going to be rehearsing and then critiquing the arguments that are in that hundred-page reading that I assigned for you this week. This is the only time something like this will happen in the course. And I do that because these ideas are so fundamental and we are going to be wrestling with them throughout the course, so it's important to me that you absorb this stuff right from the beginning and think about it and be critical of it and engage it. Kaufman's ideas are very important. They're also overstated in some ways and that's why we're going to be wrestling with some of these ideas throughout the course.

So, let's begin with Kaufman's characterization of what he calls pagan religion — that's the term that he uses. The fundamental idea of pagan religion, he says, and I quote, is "the idea that there exists a realm of being prior to the gods and above them, upon which they [the gods] depend, and whose decrees," even "they must obey" [Kaufman 1972, 22] — the metadivine realm. This is the realm of supreme and ultimate power and it transcends the deities. The deity or the deities emerge from and are therefore subject to the laws of the metadivine realm, the forces and powers of the metadivine realm. And the nature of this realm will vary from pagan tradition to pagan tradition. It might be water. It might be darkness. It might be spirit. Or in ancient Greek religion, a more sort of philosophical polytheism, it might be fate. Even the gods are subject to the decrees of fate; they have no control over that. Kaufman asserts, therefore, this belief. Once you posit a primordial realm, some realm that is beside or beyond the gods, that's independent of them and primary, you have automatically limited the gods. So what I've done is I've spelled out here for you, consequences, logical consequences of positing a metadivine realm. Once you have a metadivine realm all of these things are going to follow.

The gods are going to be limited. They are not the source of all. They are bound by, they're subservient to, this metadivine realm. There can therefore, be no notion of a supreme divine will, an absolute or sovereign divine will. The will of any one god ultimately can be countered by the decrees of the primordial realm and the will of all the gods can be thwarted by the decrees of the primordial realm. The will of any one god can be thwarted by perhaps another god. So the gods are limited in power. They're also limited in their wisdom: that falls under this as well. They're not going to be all-knowing or all-wise because of the existence of this realm that's beyond them and which is in many ways mysterious to them as well. It's unpredictable to them too. It's not in their control or in their power. Individual gods might be very wise; they might be wise in particular crafts. There might be a god of healing, very very wise in healing, or a god of some other craft or area of knowledge. But they possess wisdom as an attribute, not as an essential characteristic.

Kaufman asserts that mythology is basic to pagan religions. Mythologies are the lives or tales of the lives of gods, tales of the lives of the gods. In pagan religions the gods are born, and they live lives very similar to human lives but on a grand scale and then they die. They might be reborn too. Pagan religions contain theogonies, birth of a god, "theogony", accounts of the births of gods. Now this impersonal primordial realm, Kaufman declares, contains the seeds of all beings. Very often in these creation stories there is some sense of some realm from which life begins to emerge usually beginning with gods. So these cosmogonies and theogonies will describe the generation of sexually differentiated divine beings; also the generation of the natural world; also the generation of human beings and animals: in other words, this is the primordial womb for all that is — divine, human and natural. It is the source of everything mundane and divine.

What that means, Kaufman asserts, is that in pagan religion there's very often a fluid boundary between the divine, the human, and the natural worlds. They blur into one another because they all emerge ultimately from the same primordial world stuff. These distinctions between them are soft. We see this in the fact that the gods are very often associated with natural powerful forces, right? The sky is a god; the fire is a god; fertility — a natural process — is a god. So there's no real distinction between the worship of gods and the worship of nature. Second, he says, because humans also emerge ultimately from this primordial realm there's a confusion of the boundary between the divine and the human that's common, he says — he chooses the word "confusion" — that's common in pagan religion. And so we often have in pagan religions unions between divine beings and human beings. Kaufman argues, and I quote, that "the continuity [of] the divine and human realm is [at] the basis of the pagan belief in apotheosis" [Kaufman

1972, 36] — humans becoming gods; perhaps after death for example becoming immortal, or very often kings when they ascend to the throne become gods.

Whatever power the gods have, Kaufman says, is not due to the fact that their will is absolute or their spirit is absolute. The realm that transcends the gods, this metadivine realm, is that which has ultimate power and the stuff of which it is made is what has ultimate power. So power is materially conceived. It inheres in certain things, in certain substances, particularly substances or materials that are deeply connected to whatever this primordial world stuff is. So if it's blood, then blood that courses through the veins of living creatures is seen to have some deep and powerful connection with the metadivine realm and that is where power resides. If it is water, then water will be viewed as particularly materially powerful in that particular system.

So gods have power only insofar as they are connected with that primordial world "stuff," a technical term that I use throughout this lecture! That means that magic is possible in such a system. Because power is materially conceived — in other words, since it is believed to inhere in certain natural substances that resemble or are connected to the primordial world stuff that's the source of all power — then magic is possible by manipulating those material substances in certain ways. It might be clay. It might be water. It might be blood. Then whatever is believed to hold the power of this primordial life force, humans can tap into, and influence the activities of the metadivine realm. So through manipulation, magical manipulation of certain substances, they can harness, Kaufman says, they can harness these forces, these independent self-operating forces. And so the human magician is really a technician and he can make these forces come to bear on even the gods, to coerce the gods to do his will and so on. So magic in a pagan system, Kaufman claims, is a way of getting around the gods, circumventing the capricious will of the gods and demons. His magic is directed at the metadivine realm, trying to tap into its powers. It's not directed at the gods. It's trying to tap into the ultimate source of power to use that power to influence the gods in a particular way or protect oneself against the gods. Similarly, divination. Divination is an attempt to discern the future that, once again, heads right to the source of power. It's not directed at the gods, unless you're hoping to use them as a medium through which to get access to the metadivine realm, but ultimately most divination is aimed at tapping the secrets of the metadivine realm and not the gods. Discerning the will of the gods is really of little use, because even their will can be thwarted or overthrown by other gods or by the decrees of the metadivine realm.

The pagan cult, Kaufman claims, is a system of rites. Now I use the word "cult" and every year people look at me and say "what is cult? I don't even understand what that means." We'll learn more about "cult," but it refers to a system of rites, okay? A system of rites, and we'll be looking at the Israelite cult later. So the pagan cult, he says, is a system of rites that involves a manipulation of substances — again, blood, animal flesh, human flesh, precious metals and so on — that are believed to have some kind of inherent power, again, because of their connection to whatever the primordial world stuff may be in that tradition. So according to Kaufman there's always an element of magic in the pagan cult. It's seeking through these rituals and manipulations of certain substances to, again, let loose certain powers, set into motion certain forces, that will coerce a god to be propitiated, for example, or calmed or to act favorably or to vindicate the devotees, and so on. Some of those cultic acts might be defensive or protective so that the god cannot harm the worshiper. Many of the cultic festivals are keyed in to mythology, the stories of the lives of the gods. Many of the cultic festivals will be reenactments of events in the life of the god: a battle that the god had...the death of the god. Usually in the winter, cultic rituals will reenact the death of the god and then, in spring, the rising or resurrection of the god. These are all reenactment festivals that occur very often. And it's believed that by reenacting these festivals in this cultic way, one brings magical powers into play and can in fact ensure and maintain the reemergence of life in the spring. So it's essential for the maintenance, preservation of the world.

One final and very important point, and we're going to wrestle with this quite a bit during the year: Kaufman claims, again, in the polytheistic worldview, the primordial realm contains the seeds of all being: everything is generated from that realm, good and bad. So just as there are good gods who might protect human beings there are also evil gods who seek to destroy both humans and other gods. Death and disease are consigned to the realm of these evil demons or these impure evil spirits, but they are siblings with the good gods. Human beings are basically powerless, he says, in the continual cosmic struggle between the good gods and the evil demons, unless they can utilize magic, divination, tap into the powers of the metadivine realm, circumvent the gods who might be making their lives rather miserable. But what's important is that Kaufman insists that in the pagan view evil is an autonomous demonic realm. It is as primary and real as the realm of the holy or good gods. Evil is a metaphysical reality. It is built into the structure of the universe. That's the way the universe was made. The primordial stuff that spawned all that is, spawned it good and bad and exactly as it is, and it's there and it's real.

Salvation, he says, is the concern of humans. The gods aren't interested in human salvation from the capricious forces and powers in the world because they're trying to save themselves. You know, the good gods are being attacked by the evil gods; the powers and decrees of the metadivine realm are hassling them as well as anybody else. So they can't be worried about humans; they're worried about themselves. Salvation is attained through magic or gnostic means — gnosticism refers to knowledge of secrets that can in some way liberate one from the regular rules — and so as long as one can somehow circumvent the gods, tie oneself into the powers of the metadivine realm to be beyond the reach of the demons and the capricious gods who make life on earth a misery, that is the path for salvation.

So, Kaufman says that the pagan worldview is one of an amoral universe [looking at the blackboard] somewhere around here...there we go. Amoral universe. Not a moral universe; not an immoral universe; but an amoral universe. It is morally neutral. There are gods who are legislators and guardians of social order and justice. But their laws aren't absolute: they can be leveled by the decrees of this supreme metadivine realm. And since the knowledge and wisdom of each god is limited, morality can be defined as what a particular god likes or desires and that may be different from what another god likes or desires. And there's no absolute morality then. And it's that picture of the universe, Kaufman wants to argue, that is challenged by the monotheistic revolution. Again he sees this as a revolution of ancient Israel.

Chapter 3. Kaufman's Characterization of One Sovereign God

So according to Kaufman the fundamental idea of ancient Israelite writing, which receives no systematic formulation but permeates the entire Bible in his view, is a radically new idea of a god who is himself the source of all being — not subject to a metadivine realm. There's no transcendent cosmic order or power. He does not emerge from some preexisting realm and therefore he is free of all of the limitations of myth and magic — we'll go through these one by one — but a God whose will is absolute and sovereign. All right? So what then are the implications of the elimination of this metadivine realm? Just as these points flowed logically from positing a metadivine realm, what flows logically from eliminating a metadivine realm and positing simply a god that does not emerge from any preexisting power or order or realm? Well, first of all there's no theogony or mythology in the Bible. God isn't born from some primordial womb; he doesn't have a life story. There's no realm that is primary to him or prior to him and there is no realm that is the source of his power and wisdom. So in the opening chapters of Genesis, God simply is. He doesn't grow, he doesn't age, he doesn't mature, he doesn't have in the Bible a female consort. God doesn't die. [So in the Hebrew Bible, Kaufman claims, for the first time in history we meet an unlimited God who is timeless and ageless and nonphysical and eternal.](#)

That means that this God transcends nature. Which means we're going to get rid of number three [on the blackboard] as well, right? As the sovereign of all realms, God isn't by nature bound to any particular realm. He's not identifiable as a force of nature or identified with a force of nature. Nature certainly becomes the stage of God's expression of his will. He expresses his will and purpose through forces of nature in the Bible. But nature isn't God himself. He's not identified [with it]. He's wholly other. He isn't kin to humans in any way either. So there is no blurring, no soft boundary between humans and the divine, according to Kaufman, in the Bible. There's no apotheosis in the Bible. No life after death in the Bible either. Did you know that? Have to wait a few centuries for that idea to come along, but certainly not in the Hebrew Bible: people live 70 years and that's it. So there's no process by which humans become gods and certainly no process of the reverse as well. Magic in the Hebrew Bible is represented as useless. It's pointless. There's no metadivine realm to tap into. Power doesn't inhere in any stuff in the natural world. So the world is sort of de-divinized. Demythologized. Power isn't understood as a material thing or something that inheres in material substances. God can't be manipulated or coerced by charms or words or rituals. They have no power and cannot be used in that way, and so magic is sin. Magic is sin or rebellion against God because it's predicated on a whole mistaken notion of God having limited power. There are magical conceptions throughout the Bible — you're going to run into them. But interestingly enough the editors of the stories in which they appear will very often hammer home the conclusion that actually what happened happened, because God willed it to happen. The event occurred because God wanted it to occur. It didn't occur independently of his will or by virtue of some power that's inherent in the magician's artifices. So Kaufman argues that magic in the Bible is recast as a witness to God's sovereignty, God's power. And they're stripped — magical actions are stripped — of their autonomous potency. Again, they're serving as vehicles then for the manifestation of the will of God.

Divination is also unassimilable to the monotheistic idea, according to Kaufman, because it also presupposes the existence of some metadivine realm, some source of power, knowledge or information that transcends God. And again, it's an attempt to reveal God's secrets in an ungodly way, predicated on a mistake. It is permitted to make inquiries of God through oracular devices but God only conveys information at his own will. There's no ritual or incantation, Kaufman says, or material substance that can coerce a revelation from God. So, we will see things that look like magic and divination and oracles and dreams and prophecy in the pagan world and in ancient Israel. But Kaufman says the similarity is a similarity in form only. And it's a superficial, formal, external similarity. Each of these phenomena he says is transformed by the basic Israelite idea of one supreme transcendent God whose will is absolute and all of these things relate to the direct word and will of God. They aren't recourse to a separate science or lore or body of knowledge or interpretive craft that calls upon forces or powers that transcend God or are independent of God.

By the same token the cult, Kaufman says, has no automatic or material power. It's not just sort of a place where certain kinds of magical coercive acts happen. The cult isn't designed to service the material needs of God, either. It doesn't affect his life and vitality by enacting certain rituals: you don't ensure that God doesn't die and so on. No events in God's life are celebrated — the festivals that are carried out in the cultic context. So the mythological rationales for cult that you find amongst Israel's neighbors are replaced, and they're replaced very often by historical rationales. This action is done to commemorate such and such event in the history of the nation. So pagan festivals in Israel, Kaufman says, are historicized, commemorating events in the life of the people and not in the story of the god's life since we have no mythology. But we are going to be spending a fair amount of time talking actually about the meaning and the function of Israel's purity laws and cultic laws in a later lecture.

Now since God is himself the transcendent source of all being and since he is good, in a monotheistic system there are no evil agents that constitute a realm that opposes God as an equal rival. No divine evil

agents. Again, in the pagan worldview the primordial womb spawns all sorts of beings, all kinds of divinities, good and evil that are in equal strength. They're sort of locked in this cosmic struggle. But in the Israelite worldview, if God is the source of all being, then they're can't be a realm of supernatural beings that do battle with him. There's no room for a divine antagonist of the one supreme God, which is leading us down here to this point: that sin and evil are demythologized in the Hebrew Bible. And that's very interesting. It's going to lead to a lot of interesting things. It's also going to create a really huge problem for monotheistic thought [that] they're going to struggle with for centuries and actually still do struggle with today. But again, in the pagan worldview, sin is understood very often as the work of a demon or an evil god that might possess a person, might have to be exorcised from that person by means of magic. If you tap into some of these substances then you can use the magical, the powers in those substances, to coerce the demon to be expelled from the person's body. These are things that are very common in polytheistic and pagan practices. But in Israel we have no metadivine realm to spawn these evil beings, these various gods. So Israelite religion did not conceive of sin as caused by an independent evil power that exists out there in the universe and is defying the will of God. Instead evil comes about as a result of the clash of the will of God and the will of humans who happen to have the freedom to rebel.

There's nothing inherently supernatural about sin. It's not a force or a power built into the universe. Kaufman is claiming therefore that in Israel evil is transferred from the metaphysical realm (built into the physical structure of the universe) to the moral realm. I've put it up here for you. [Evil is a moral and not a metaphysical reality. It doesn't have a concrete independent existence. And that means that human beings and only human beings are the potential source of evil in the world.](#) Responsibility for evil lies in the hands of human beings. In the Hebrew Bible, no one will ever say the devil made me do it. [There is no devil in the Hebrew Bible.](#) That's also the invention of a much later age. And that is an important and critical ethical revolution. [Evil is a moral and not a metaphysical reality](#) [pointing to a student in the classroom]. You had a [question].

Student: What about the serpent in the Garden of Eden?

Professor Christine Hayes: Great. That's what you get to talk about. Wonderful question. Well what about when Eve is tempted by the serpent? Who is the serpent? What is he doing? What's going on? What is Kaufman claiming? Okay. That's exactly the kind of stuff that should be popping into your head — — What about...what about? — okay, and in section, you're going to be discussing exactly that story. Okay? And that's one of those texts... and in a minute if I haven't at the end of a lecture, ask again if I haven't kind of gotten to part of an answer to your question. Okay? But again, this emphasis on evil as a moral choice — think of Genesis 4, where God warns Cain, who's filled with anger and jealousy and is thinking about doing all kinds of horrible things to his brother, and God says, "Sin couches at the door; / Its urge is toward you, / Yet you can be its master" [Gen 4:7b]. This is a question of moral choice.

Final point then is...and we're not going to talk about salvation right now...but we're going to talk about the fact that the only supreme law is the will of God, because God is a creator God rather than a created God. He's imposed order, an order upon the cosmos. And so the pagan picture of an amoral universe of just competing powers, good and evil, Kaufman says, is transformed into a picture of a moral cosmos. The highest law is the will of God and that imposes a morality upon the structure of the universe. So in sum, Kaufman's argument is this: [Israel conceived of the divine in an entirely new way. Israel's God differed from the pagan gods in his essential nature. The pagan gods were natural gods. They were very often associated with blind forces of nature with no intrinsic moral character, he says. And the god of Israel was understood to transcend nature and his will was not only absolute, it was absolutely good and moral.](#) A lot of people say, well in a way didn't we just rename the metadivine realm God? No. Because the difference here is that it's posited not only that this God is the only power but that he is only good.

And that was not the case with the metadivine realm. Right? That was morally neutral. But there's a moral claim that's being made by the writers of the Hebrew Bible about this supreme power, this God. God is depicted as just, compassionate. Morality therefore is perceived as conforming to the will of God. And there are absolute standards then of justice and reverence for life.

Now Kaufman says God is demythologized, but even though he's demythologized he's not rendered completely impersonal. He's spoken of anthropomorphically, so that we can capture his interaction with human beings. This is the only way, Kaufman says, you can write in any meaningful sense about the interaction between God and humanity. So he has to be anthropomorphized. [But the interaction between God and humans, he says, happens not through nature but through history. God is not known through natural manifestations. He's known by his action in the world in historical time and his relationship with a historical people.](#)

Chapter 4. Continuity or Radical Break?

I just want to read you a few sentences from an article Kaufman wrote, a different one from the one that you read. But it sums up his idea that there's an abyss that separates monotheism and polytheism and he says that it would be a mistake to think that the difference between the two is arithmetic — that a polytheistic tradition in which there are ten gods is a lot more like monotheism than a polytheistic tradition in which there are 40 gods, because as you get smaller in number it gets closer to being monotheistic. He says the pagan idea, and I quote, "does not approach Israelite monotheism as it diminishes the number of its gods. The Israelite conception of God's unity entails His sovereign transcendence over all." That's the real issue. "It rejects the pagan idea of a realm beyond the deity, the source of mythology and magic. The affirmation that the will of God is supreme and absolutely free is a new and non-pagan category of thought" [Kaufman 1956, 13]. That's in an article in the *Great Ages and Ideas of the Jewish People*. And he goes on again to say that this affirmation isn't stated dogmatically anywhere but it pervades Israelite creativity, biblical texts. He also asserts that the idea kind of developed over time, but that basically there was a fundamental revolution and break, and then within that there was some development of some of the latent potential of that idea.

So, which is it, which is part of the question that came from over here, [gestures toward student who had earlier asked a question]? You have on the one hand the claim that Israelite religion is essentially continuous with Ancient Near Eastern polytheism. It's merely limiting the number of gods worshipped to one, but it houses that God in a temple. It offers him sacrifices and so on. And then on the other hand we have Kaufman's claim that Israelite religion is a radical break from the religions of the Ancient Near Eastern. Well, the value of Kaufman's work, I think, lies in the insight that monotheism and polytheism in the abstract — now I'm not sure they exist anywhere in the world — but in the abstract are predicated on divergent intuitions as systems. They do seem to describe very different worlds. And therefore as a system, the difference between Israel's God and the gods of Israel's neighbors was not merely quantitative. It was qualitative. There's a qualitative difference here. However when you read his work it's clear that he often has to force his evidence and force it rather badly. And it's simply a fact, that practices and ideas that are not strictly or even strongly monotheistic do appear in the Bible. So perhaps those scholars who stress the continuity between Israel and her environment are right after all.

And this impasse I think can be resolved to a large degree when we realize that we have to make a distinction between — well let's do it this way first. We're going to talk about a distinction between the actual — I hate to say that as if I can somehow show you a snapshot of what people did 3,000 years ago — but between the actual religious practices and beliefs of the actual inhabitants of Israel and Judah, we're going to call that Israelite-Judean religion: what somebody back in the year 900 BCE might have

done when they went to the temple; and what they might have thought they were doing when they went to the temple, because I'm not sure it was necessarily what the author of the Book of Deuteronomy says they were doing when they go to the temple; so [there's a difference between what actual people, the inhabitants of Israel and Judah, did — we'll call that Israelite Judean religion — and the religion that's promoted, or the worldview, I prefer that term, that's being promoted by the later writers and editors of biblical stories who are telling the story of these people — we'll call that biblical religion, the religion or the worldview that we can see emerging from many biblical texts](#). That distinction is found in an article in your Jewish Study Bible, an article by Steven Geller (Geller 2004, 2021-2040). You're going to be reading that later on in the course. But be aware of that distinction and that article.

What second millennium Hebrews and early first millennium Israelites or Judeans, Judahites, actually believed or did is not always retrievable, in fact probably not retrievable, to us. We have some clues. But in all likelihood Hebrews of an older time, the patriarchal period, the second millennium BCE — they probably weren't markedly different from many of their polytheistic neighbors. Archaeology would suggest that. In some ways that's true. We do find evidence in the Bible as well as in the archaeological record, of popular practices that are not strictly monotheistic. The worship of little household idols, local fertility deities, for example. [Most scholars conjecture that ancient Israelite-Judean religion, the practices of the people in the kingdoms of Israel and Judah in the first millennium BCE, was maybe monolatrist](#). They might have promoted the worship of one God, Yahweh, without denying the existence of other gods and still kept their little idols and fertility gods or engaged in various syncretistic practices. It was probably monolatrist rather than monotheistic, really asserting the reality of only one God. Moreover our evidence suggests that Yahweh was in many respects very similar to many of the gods of Canaanite religion. And we'll be talking about some of those at the appropriate time. But continuities with Canaanite and Ancient Near Eastern religions are apparent in the worship practices and the cult objects of ancient Israel and Judah as they're described in the biblical stories and as we find them in archaeological discoveries.

The Hebrew Bible also contains sources that exhibit features of what Kaufman has described as contemporary polytheisms. In Genesis 6 — I mean, the text you pointed out is a good one but even better, go look at Genesis 6 where you have these nephilim, these divine beings who descend to earth and they mate with female humans. That's a real fluid boundary between the divine and human realms, if you ask me. But it only happens there, in one spot. In many passages too Yahweh is represented as presiding over a council of gods. Certainly in the Psalms we have these sort of poetic and metaphoric descriptions where God is, "Okay guys, what do you think?" presiding — or he's one of them, actually. In one Psalm — it's great — he's one of the gods and he says, "You know, you guys don't know what you're doing. Let me take over." And he stands up in the council and takes over. And there are other passages in the Bible too that assume the existence of other gods worshipped by other nations. So there's certainly stuff like that in there you have to think about.

Now nevertheless, the most strongly monotheistic sources of the Bible do posit a God that is qualitatively different from the gods that populated the mythology of Israel's neighbors and probably also Israelite-Judean religion. In these sources the Israelites' deity is clearly the source of all being. He doesn't emerge from a preexisting realm. He has no divine siblings. His will is absolute. His will is sovereign. He's not affected by magical coercion. And biblical monotheism, biblical religion, assumes that this God is inherently good. He's just. He's compassionate. And human morality is conformity to his will. Because certain texts of the Jewish Bible posit this absolutely good God who places absolute moral demands on humankind, biblical monotheism is often referred to as ethical monotheism, so it's a term that you'll see quite a bit: ethical monotheism. [Beginning perhaps as early as the eighth century and continuing for several centuries, literate and decidedly monotheistic circles within Israelite society put a monotheistic](#)

framework on the ancient stories and traditions of the nation. They molded them into a foundation myth that would shape Israelite and Jewish self-identity and understanding in a profound way. They projected their monotheism onto an earlier time, onto the nation's most ancient ancestors. Israelite monotheism is represented in the Bible as beginning with Abraham. Historically speaking it most likely began much later, and probably as a minority movement that grew to prominence over centuries. But that later monotheism is projected back over Israel's history by the final editors of the Jewish Bible. And that creates the impression of the biblical religion that Kaufman describes so well.

But the biblical text itself, the biblical record, is very conflicted, and that's part of the fun of reading it. And you will see the biblical record pointing to two different and conflicting realities. You will find religious practices and views that aren't strictly monotheistic and you'll find later religious practices and views that are. And the later sources, which we might best call biblical religion, are breaking therefore not only with Ancient Near Eastern practices but also with Israelite-Judean practices, with other elements within their own society. [So biblical religion as Kaufman describes it, isn't, I think, just a revolution of Israel against the nations. I think it's also a civil war of Israel against itself.](#) And that's an aspect that is really not entertained by Kaufman. And I think it's an important one for us to entertain so that we can allow the biblical text to speak to us in all its polyphony. And not try to force it all into one model: "Well, I know this is monotheistic text so, gosh, I'd better come up with an explanation of Genesis 6 that works with monotheism," You're going to be freed of having to do that; you're going to be freed of having to do that. Let the text be contradictory and inconsistent and difficult. Let it be difficult. Don't homogenize it all.

So the differences between the god of the monotheizing sources of the Bible and the gods of surrounding Mesopotamian literature and older Israelite ideas, perhaps, they're apparent from the very first chapters of Genesis. That's a creation story in Genesis 1, we're going to see, a creation story that's added to the Pentateuch, Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible, Genesis through Deuteronomy. This creation story is added to the Pentateuch probably in one of the last rounds of editing, probably sixth century perhaps, we don't really know. But Genesis 1 is a very strongly monotheistic opening to the primeval myths that are then contained in the next ten chapters of Genesis. So next time we're going to start with a close reading and examination of Genesis 1 through 4. We're going to read these stories with an eye to Israel's adaptation of Near Eastern motifs and themes to sort of monotheize those motifs and themes and express a new conception of God and the world and humankind.