Akhenaton and Egyptian Origin of Hebrew Monotheism

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Abstract

Egyptian origin of Hebrew monotheism may sound like a new idea, but it is not. Apart from extra biblical sources ranging from archaeological findings to cultural history of the Mediterranean region and the Far East, there are glaring biblical support for the view that Egyptian monotheism had undeniable influence on Mosaic religion. The geographical location of Egypt in the map of Africa should not weaken the perception and acceptance of this indubitable fact that there was contact between Moses and Akhenaton is no longer a doubt. Acceptance of the fact that Hebrew monotheism originated from Egypt do not cause any harm to Judaism and Christianity and the fact that Egypt was the seedbed of monotheism should not create any surprise. This paper is an interpretation of biblical records with a synthesis of scholarly views on the origin of Hebrew monotheism and it relies largely on authentic biblical studies.

Key words: Akhenaton; Hebrew Monotheism; Egypt; Pharaoh

Introduction

Anthropologist John Lewis once said that primitive religion started as polytheism or the worship of many gods. Polytheism was a kind of religious liberty because it demonstrated practical liberation for man to choose the object of worship. In polytheism “man projects more and more of his own growing individuality upon the spirits, and they themselves became individuals after his own likeness. The spirits become personal deities” (Lewis 180). Lewis has also argued that polytheism is not peculiar to tribal and village life, and that advanced cultures of India, Egypt, Mesopotamia and Greece, who were benefactors of global civilization all passed through the religious evolutionary process from polytheism to theism.

Monotheism according to Lewis is a late development in religious evolution, as a result of the merger of religion with philosophy. Lewis writes: “Even the Hebrews were not monotheist at first, but henotheists… Only in later Jewish religion and the influence of the great prophets did the concept of a single deity emerge… monotheism, in any real sense of the word, is the culmination and not the origin of the religious quest. It is dependent not only on that great expansion of civilization which united many nations in one empire and equally subdued the many gods to one Supreme God…” (180).

Monotheism is the conviction that only one god exists, to the exclusion of others. Henotheism is devotion to one god conceding the potency of others (Baruch Halpern 524 - 5). Some scholars have said that monotheism is a late development in religion and the Jews were not originally monotheistic but henotheists. Baruch Halpern avers that all the communities in the Ancient Near East had pantheon of gods and that “one generation of gods succeeds the next just as human succeed one another”; it was under powerful monarchs like Akhenaton of Egypt (ca. 1350 B.C.E.), and Nabonidus of Babylon that attempts were made to impose a god atop a state pantheon. Monotheism, according to Yehezkel Kaufmann tolerates multiple deities, but properly
subordinated to the one. It tolerates myths of primordial struggle for cosmic supremacy. “Two elements distinguish it from polytheism: a conviction that the one controls the pantheon and the idea of false gods” (Halpern 525).

**Akhenaton—The Revolutionary Pharaoh**

During the new kingdom period, the priests of Amon became corrupt, dishonest and exploitative. They became powerful and relevant in administering the kingdoms. “The priests of Osiris grew popular with wealthy people, to whom they offered the possibility of immortal life in return for money” (Sherman and Salisbury 24). At that period a new king ascended the Egyptian throne and religious revolution against priestcraft, magic and superstition in ancient Egypt was championed and powerfully coordinated by Pharaoh Amenhotep IV who came to the throne probably in 1352 BCE. Amenhotep IV was the son of Amenophis and grandson of Thutmose III. He was the pharaoh during the eighteenth dynasty. At the beginning of his tenure, the king disclosed an agenda of sweeping reforms. But he failed to bring the priests of Amon under his control so he disbanded old religions and imposed the worship of one God throughout Egypt. As a strategy to halt polytheism, the king withdrew his support from old temples and dissolved the traditional priesthood. In his drive to impose a strict monotheism, Akhenaton declared all other Egyptian gods and goddesses as worthless idols and he founded a new religion honoring the sun-god, Aton, which was the ancient designation for the physical sun.

The king changed his name from Amenhotep (“Amen rests”) to Ikhnaton, meaning “Aton is satisfied,” or “one who is effective on behalf of Aton” (Burns 36; Stokstad 119). He ordered the worship of the old gods to cease, and directed the name of Amen to be erased from all tombs and monuments (Clement 60). He celebrated his break with the past by relocating the capital from Thebes to the modern El-Amarna and he called the new capital Akhenaton, meaning the “horizon of Aton”. The decision to build a new capital was on the fact that the old religions had a strong presence at Thebes, which had many monuments and temples of the old gods. Thebes was also under the firm control of the priest of Amon. The king as the son of Aton presided over the worship as a divine priest. Scholars are divided however on whether Akhenaton allowed himself to be worshiped along with Aton. H. A. Clement says unlike other kings, he refused to have himself worshiped (60). Ronald Youngblood observed that Akhenaton “did not deny to his courtiers the questionable privilege of worshipping him as the deified pharaoh” (12). William Mcniell avers that Akhenaton “undertook to suppress all rival priests and to make the worship of Aton and himself as the son of Aton the sole religion of the empire” (139).

Mcniell further reported that Akhenaton revived the old kingdom doctrine that immortality was a gift from the pharaoh, and could only be attained through him alone. Mcniell writes: “The whole Aton movement may have originated as a reassertion and reform of the ancient worship of the Heliopolitan sun god - Re. If so, a putative return to ancient purity justified radical departure from the immediate past” (139). Ronald Youngblood observes that while it is true that Akhenaton and his family broke with Egyptian polytheism and worshipped the sun-god, he also accorded himself the privilege of being worshipped as the deified pharaoh, and the Egyptian populace was either ignorant or antagonistic of Akhenaton's view of religion (12). Amenhotep IV was a great king who showed much concern for religious progress than with conquest. His wife and queen, Nefertiti gave him all the support he needed to promote religion in his kingdom. We do not have valid records on the nature and focus of Amenhotep's religion. But his religion became unpopular both among the people and the traditional priesthood. Most historians are convinced that Amenhotep and Nefertiti were monotheists (Mckay, Hill and
Buckler 27). For a tenure that lasted seventeen years, he transformed the political, spiritual, and cultural life of Egypt.

Akhenaton introduced a new naturalism in art, where he was portrayed with a protruding belly. The artwork in Aten's temple featured portraits of the wife, Queen Nefertiti, without any portrait for the king, which suggest that the Queen may have played a pivotal role in starting the religious revolution. Akhenaton popularized the moral philosophy of “maat”, or “divine truth”, and adopted a kingly title “living in maat”, which was a propaganda for truth that found expression in new artistic works. The king’s portraits show unusual description of the physique, “long, thin arms and legs, a protruding stomach, swelling thighs, a thin neck supporting an elongated skull” (Stokstad 119). The religious policies of Akhenaton and Nefertiti were comprehensively at variance with Egyptian historic and traditional beliefs. McKay, Hill and Buckler have reported that Egyptians had worshipped a host of gods, chief among whom was Amon-Re, “but the Egyptians merged them and worshipped Amon-Re as the king of gods. Besides Amon-Re, the Egyptians worshipped such other deities as Osiris, Osiris wife Isis, and his son, Horus, Egyptian religion had room for many gods and an easy tolerance for new gods” (27). The Greek historian Herodotus once remarked that the Egyptians “are excessively religious more so than other men” (qtd. in McKay, Hill and Buckler 27).

Akhenaton ascended the throne at the age of eleven. He was a very unique person, and things that occupied previous kings did not concern him. He was not involved in hunting; neither did he kill his people for any reason. He was allergic to bloodshed. H. A. Clement writes: “The more he thought about things, the more he became certain that there was only one God. He had no faith in the terrifying gods of his countrymen, and he distrusted the priests” (58, 59). Akhenaton's iconoclastic religious reforms met with stiff opposition. His condemnation and abolition of polytheism was a direct threat to Egyptians who trusted in the gods for immortality. The idea was that if Akhenaton is allowed to destroy faith in the gods, then the whole structure and edifice of organized religion including the priesthood would have collapsed at a high cost to the religious community. Opposition to Akhenaton's reformation was seen as a patriotic pursuit and a justifiable offensive. Many Egyptians recalled with nostalgia, the benevolence and goodwill of Amon-Re, when he drove out the Hyksos and ushered Egypt into a new era of happiness, progress and prosperity. The social and economic progress of Egypt was attributed to the efficacy of traditional religion. Some Egyptians were of the view that if the Egyptians repudiate the gods and allowed Akhenaton to treat traditional religion with ignominy, then it means the ontological order that sustains Egyptian society has been broken and disbanded.

Apart from the genuine logic of the masses, Akhenaton was in a collision course with the established and commercial priesthood who manipulated religion for economic purposes. It was impossibility for the priests to fold their hands and watch the collapse of their lucrative business. McKay et al. have identified fundamental issues in the conflict between Akhenaton and the priests of traditional religion: “Although many priests were genuinely scandalized by Akhenaton's monotheism, many others were concerned more about their own welfare… Akhenaton had destroyed their livelihood and their reason for existence. On grounds of pure self-interest, the established priesthood opposed Akhenaton” (28). The priest succeeded in mobilizing the masses, especially the homo religiosus to constitute a strong opposition against the king, which in turn pushed Akhenaton to intolerance, despotism and oppression against the priests and votaries of traditional religion who were not only strong but also resilient. The expectation that Akhenaton's imposition of strict monotheism and the abolition of the old gods would fail was
imminent *ab initio*. The reform was imposed from above without any consensus among the masses (the people).

Mckay et al. are convinced that the prime reason for the king's failure is that his new god had no connection with the religious history of the Egyptian people who had confidence in the old gods. Average Egyptians were no doubt distressed and disheartened when their familiar gods were outlawed, for they were the heavenly powers that had made Egypt powerful and unique. The fanaticism and persecution that accompanied the new monotheism were in complete defiance of the Egyptian tradition of tolerant polytheism, or worship of several gods (28). Despite all his efforts, Akhenaton did not have committed and dedicated followers. The few who worked for Atonism, only pretended to believe as evidence of loyalty to the king. That was the reason why Atonism collapsed utterly after the demise of Akhenaton. There are cumulative historical evidences to the effect that Akhenaton was a deeply religious person. Even when his empire came under severe attack and rebellion, he refused to defend it through warfare. Akhenaton was convinced that religion and truth were more preferred than bloodshed. Akhenaton married a beautiful girl Nefertiti at the age of nine. He had no faith in the terrifying gods of his countrymen, and he distrusted the priests; he did not use military power to preserve his kingdom, Akhenaton failed in his reform, died under thirty, worn out, frustrated and disappointed. Immediately after his death the status quo was restored.

Eminent Egyptologist, J. H. Breasted has informed us that Akhenaton's vision of one supreme God was not to be limited to Egypt, but a universal monotheism. He bestowed ethical quality to Aton as the author and controller of the moral order of the entire universe. Akhenaton taught that Aton rewards people for integrity and purity of heart. He envisaged the new god as an eternal creator and sustainer of all that is of benefit to man, and as a heavenly father who watches with benevolent care over all his creature. Conceptions like these of the unity, righteousness, and benevolence of God were not attained again until the time of the Hebrew prophets some 600 years later (Mckay, Hill and Buckler 36). Akhenaton's revolution for reasons highlighted above died with him. Pharaohs who succeeded him did not agree with his idealism. He was succeeded by his son-in-law Tutankhaton, who had neither the will, nor the commitment to perpetuate those religious reforms of his father-in-law. The priests of the old gods were ready to give the new pharaoh a tough fight, but he avoided any form of confrontation with them. The priests have declared Akhenaton a criminal, and the young king feared for his life and changed his name to Tutankhamen and openly renounced the religious convictions of his father-in-law. Tutankhamen died at 18 years of age, and was succeeded by a general-Harmhab, who speedily destroyed Akhenaton's temples, abolished his monotheistic faith and restored the worship of the old gods and the priesthood (Sherman and Salisbury 27).

The death of Akhenaton was the end of an era. Egypt did not have good and competent leaders among the immediate successors of Akhenaton. The political vacuum and the drive to abolish the legacies of Akhenaton pushed Harmhab to restore the old gods, which eventually led to the gradual revival of the old superstition, ignorance, priesthood that was the order of the day in the pre-Akhenaton Egypt. The teachings of Akhenaton lingered with the elites, as they upheld the moral virtues of Aton. The educated class in a reasonable conservative motivation transferred the attributes of Aton to Ammon-Re. Egyptian religion at this juncture, passed through accretion and syncretism as the traditional solar deity was worshipped as the only god and the epitome of righteousness, justice and truth. J. H. Breasted in his *The Dawn of Conscience*, noted that the sun-god was worshipped as a loving and merciful being “who heareth prayers, who giveth the hand to the poor, who saveth the weary” (316). Despite all the efforts by the educated class to
reposition the traditional religion with credible doctrines and to save it from ruin, the power of superstition, the captivation of magic and the propaganda of “a degenerate priesthood were far too deadly in their effects to be overcome by exalted doctrines. In the end, the whole system of belief and worship was engulfed by formalism and ignorance and fetishism, animal worship and other magical crudities” (Burns 37). The priests exploited the success of the new era to restore the crudest form of commercialism where the most important function of religion was the sale of formulas and charms that is potent enough to stifle conscience and trick the gods to grant immortality (Burns 37). The tragedy of religion had pervasive influence in Egyptian society and culture, the decay of religion affected philosophy, art and government, in the words of Burns, “all of them went down together” (Burns 37).

The Origin of Akhenaton Monotheism

What was the motive for the Akhenaton religious innovation? Was it influenced by Hebrew religion? Was it a political strategy to adopt Aton as the supreme god? Was it to outstrip the powers of the priests of Amon? Was it a spiritual vision or a dream? These queries were raised by scholars (Sherman and Salisbury 26). The source for Akhenaton's inspiration is fundamental to this study. But, is there any evidence to buttress the fact that Akhenaton borrowed monotheistic ideas from the Hebrews who lived in Israel during his tenure. I have synthesized the conflicting answers from many reputable scholars below.

According to Ninian Smart the faith was instituted by Moses was not universal monotheism, but monolatrous which “involved the worship, by a group of its own single god” (54). Monotheism is derived from the Greek word monos, which means one, single or only, and theos, which means 'god'. Monotheism is the belief in the existence of only one God. It is contrasted with polytheism (belief in many gods), henotheism/monolatry (recognition of one supreme deity, without denying the reality of other deities), atheism (denial of the existence of God), monism (the view that there is only one ultimate reality of which everything is only a part), pantheism (the doctrine that everything is God or gods), dualism (the view that there is a cosmic struggle between the forces of good and evil), materialism (the view that matter is everything, and that it is eternal) and animism - the (worship of nature spirits). It’s a belief in a personal, transcendent creator, whose existence is different from nature and cosmos, and immanent by condescension and grace (Youngblood 10). It was proclaimed only by Old Testament and its derivatives- Judaism, Christianity and Islam. The opening statement of the basic creed of Judaism, Shema is in Deuteronomy 6:4; “Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord. In 1 Tim.2:5, Paul, the moving spirit of Jesus movement echoed: “There is one God”. In Islam, the muezzin shouts from the minaret: “There is no god but God”.

The myths of ancient societies and cultures all present pictures of developed pantheons. The various texts show succession of gods. In Egypt, the myths portray a fierce battle between the Nile and the desert, where a god is responsible for life-giving exercise, cosmic authority and control over creation. The pantheons all have a high god that supersedes other deities. According to Baruch Halpern, the high god is usually the state god (524) and this phenomenon has been described as “effective henotheism, devotion to one god conceding the potency of others” (Halpern 525). Halpern has noted that starting from the ninth century B.C.E, Israelites started to discriminate against other gods, and elevated YHWH as a superior deity (526). G. W. Anderson in tracing the foundations of Hebrew religion avers that the name of Israel's God was revealed to Moses in the burning bush experience (Exo. 3:13). In Exodus 6:2, it is stated that the God of the patriarchs revealed his name Jehovah, or Yahweh to Moses. Anderson observes that there are
other biblical insinuations to the effect that the name Yahweh was known and used in the pre-Mosaic period (Gen. 4:26; 15:7; 24:3). In ancient Israel, The Jews identified themselves as “the people of YHWH” (Judge 5:13), which implies a societal commitment to a single, national god. The Israelites cultus also embraced the ancestors. “Israelites invoked ancestor for aid in matters familial, agricultural, and political. The ancestral spirits could intervene with YHWH, to the benefit of the family, the land holding corporation that inherited its resources from the father” (Baruch Halpern 525-6).

From the 9th century BCE according to Halpern, Israelites started to distinguish YHWH from other gods. The prophetic oracle came out openly to condemn polytheism. Theodore Lewis traces the origin of Israelites monotheism to “the person of Moses, the makeup of tribal league, kinship relations, the settlement of the land of Israel and the social function of the prophets. In the early period there are clear indications of henotheism or monolatry - the worship of a single deity though recognizing the existence of others. Ancestral religion with its focus on the worship of EL seems to point to a monolatrous EL cult” (Oxford Companion to the Bible, 334). Even though the original form and the meaning of the name Yahweh is uncertain, we may accept guidance from Exo.3:13, where we have the verb “to be”: “I AM WHO I AM”, or the rendition in RSV footnotes: “I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE” (G.W. Anderson, The History and Religion of Israel 33, 34). Anderson has insisted that “the question, is not ‘what did the name originally mean?’, but rather ‘What meaning did the name convey to the Israelites?’” (The History and Religion of Israel 33). The verb 'to be', according to Anderson does not mean bare existence, but existence that is manifested in action. Yahweh reveals his nature by his action and activities among his people from generation to generation (The History and Religion of Israel 34).

Exodus narratives show Yahweh as a compassionate savior over the plight of slaves. Yahweh exercises cosmic sovereignty and supremacy over creation when he as the Lord of the force of nature inflicted plagues on Egypt, miraculously brought Israelites across the sea, and cared for them in the wilderness. Yahweh does not have any noticeable or reasonable resistance from the gods of Egypt. It is only his will that prevails over the Egyptians (1Sam.26:19; 2Kings 5:17). In the Exodus tradition, Yahweh is the Lord of history and nature who requires undivided and comprehensive allegiance of his worshippers. Yahweh did not tolerate any form of idolatry. He is a jealous God (Exo. 20:5), which depict His “active concern or zeal for His cause, and can denote negatively His intolerance of disloyalty and disobedience” (G.W. Anderson, The History and Religion of Israel 35). Yahweh is a holy God, and Israel is called to be “a holy nation in covenant with Him (Exo. 19:6).

G.W. Anderson has explained the meaning of holiness in this context: “The holy God is the living, active God, who makes His presence known in the life of men. Nor should holiness be simply equated with morality or righteousness though a close connexion between the two is recognized in some parts of the Old Testament” (The History and Religion of Israel 35). Yahweh's demand for exclusive allegiance is to be realized through the covenant bond. The covenant bond expresses a relationship that involves obligation. Yahweh will provide for and protect His people. He has delivered them from bondage en route a promised land which He will give to them. In Exo.6:7, the content of the covenant is summed up in the following words: “I will take you for my people, and I will be for you your God” (Jer.32:33). The confusion is aggravated by the presence in Genesis to Numbers of three conflicting sources, the Yahwistic source, or J; the Elohistic source, or E, and the Priestly source, or P. While the oldest source, the Yahwistic holds that the name, Yahweh was known in the pre-Mosaic period, the other two, the Elohistic and Priestly sources are of the view that the name Yahweh was first revealed to Moses.
Anderson writes: “…the revelation of a new name of God represents a new beginning in religion. Accordingly, Exodus 3:13 (E) and 6:3 (P) are saying that such a new beginning was brought about through the work of Moses” (The History and Religion of Israel 31, 32).

On the speculation that Akhenaton and Mosaic monotheism were related, Youngblood argues that if the views of some scholars that the Exodus occurred in about 1290 B.C. are to be taken seriously, then the young Moses would have lived in the palace of Akhenaton, who ruled over Egypt from about 1369 to 1383 B.C. (12). It is therefore plausible to assume that the religion of pharaoh at this time was a degraded form of Mosaic monotheism. Youngblood has also suggested another option as the source of Mosaic monotheism, which is to view it as “a divinely inspired and revealed reaction against the crudities and absurdities of Akhenaton's faith” (12). Youngblood argues further that if Moses and Akhenaton were contemporaries, as history and archaeology is leading us, it is possible that they actually discussed the nature of God to mutual benefits (12). Innocent Onyewuenyi observes that the Jews were still in Egypt in the Eighteenth Dynasty when Akhenaton introduced “the idea of the divine principle as Absolute Ruler who exercises dominance over all nature; who creates the world from the beginning and continually preserves it” (205-208). Onyewuenyi pointed to the fact that it was in the Nineteenth Dynasty under Ramses II, that the Jews faced extreme and heartless oppression. “Evidently Egyptian monotheism anticipated Jewish monotheism, and the theory often articulated that Jewish monotheism is an improvement on Egyptian polytheism is false” (208).

Was Moses a Monotheist?

On the question whether Moses was a monotheist, we invoke the authority of G.W. Anderson. In his article “The Religion of Israel”, Anderson argues that it is wrong to trace the origin of Mosaic religion to Egypt. He admitted, and ignored the similarity between Psalm 104, and Akhenaton's hymn to sun-god, “in spite of other, sometimes striking, indications of Egyptian influence in Israel wisdom literature, there is no trace of Egyptian influence in anything which may be reasonably assumed to have formed part of the religion of Moses” (“The Religion of Israel” 161). Anderson admitted with reservation that “since Moses was brought up at the Egyptian court, the novel element in his teaching was Egyptian in origin” (The History and Religion of Israel 32). Anderson affirms Breasted view when he described pharaoh Akhenaton as the heretic often associated with starting a religious revolution regarded as monotheistic in character. Anderson deny any linkage between Israelite monotheism and the radical faith of Akhenaton, and that outside the wisdom books, there is little evidence of Egyptian religious influence in the Old Testament (The History and Religion of Israel 32). While Anderson rejects any Egyptian influence on Moses, he conceded to the biblical record which point to a valid religious experience of Moses at Midian where he had married the daughter of a priest by name Jethro. His call came to him in the land of Midian, where he had married into a priestly family. It was there that the divine name was revealed to him. Later, just before the revelation of the law and the institution of the covenant at Sinai, Moses father-in-law Jethro came to meet him, acknowledged the great deliverance wrought by Yahweh, and not only presided at a sacrificial act at which Aaron, the prototype of Israelite priesthood was present, but gave advice on the administration of justice to Moses, Israel's supreme legislator (The History and Religion of Israel 32).

Anderson has also pointed to the biblical record in Judges 1:16, where it is stated that Jethro was a Kenite, and that the Kenites may have had close affinity with the Midianites, who are reported to have been zealous for Yahweh and friendly to Israel (Judges 4:11, 17; 1Sam.15:6). He suggested that Moses may have been influenced religiously from Midian. While
consistently rejecting the Egyptian influence on Mosaic religion, Anderson is convinced that there was a valid Midianite influence on Moses. Midian was the son of Abraham by Keturah (Gen. 25:1-6). The Midianites and Hebrew knew there were kinsmen and were mutually friendly. Moses married a Midianite (Exo.2:16; 3:1; 18:1), also described as Kenite (Judges 1: 16; 4:11, 17, 15am. 15:6). Before arrival at the sacred mountain, it is reported that the priest Jethro, Moses father-in-law met with Moses and the Israelites tribe and did not only confessed the greatness of Yahweh (Exo.18:1-10), but acted as the leader of worship, in which Aaron, the head of Hebrew priesthood participated together with the elders (Exo.18:12). After the worship session, Jethro suggested to Moses, basic procedures for administration of justice (Exo.18:13). Anderson noted that although the Kenite hypothesis has been strongly criticized, there is every probability that it is the most possible option in resolving the dilemma over sources of influence of Mosaic religion. The third point in Anderson's argument is that the content of Mosaic religion can be attributed to the events of the Exodus: “The deliverance of the Hebrew tribes was seen as an act of God for the good of those whom he now made his people. Historical events were the field of the divine action and in what God did his nature and purpose were revealed (“The Religion of Israel” 161).

Having debunked the Egyptian origin of Mosaic religion, Anderson avers that there is convincing evidence from the patriarchal narratives in Genesis to the effect that the ancestors of the Hebrew nation were worshippers of the one true God (“The Religion of Israel” 160). And that even though Moses announced a divine name that was not known in Hebrew religion, Anderson submitted that Moses was not the ambassador of a new God, but of the God of the Fathers: “What Moses taught about God could not but be influenced by what he had himself learned from the religious traditions of his people, traditions which would be present to the minds of those to whom he had been sent” (The Religion of Israel 161).

Anderson's fourth point is that Mosaic religion is a product of Moses religious experience. The experience of the burning bush was to create a lasting and progressive communion between Moses and God. There is a link both with that personal communion with God which is a notable feature in the patriarchal narratives and also with the later prophetic tradition in which history was interpreted in terms of the divine purpose...The man who has heard God speak is the herald and interpreter of the divine action; and through his faith and insight he can make plain the place in the divine purpose of disasters and deliverance alike (Anderson, The Religion of Israel 161).

In an attempt to answer the question: Was Moses a monotheist? Anderson avers thus: “Moses was not a monotheist in the later, abstract sense of the term. But there is justification for the claim which has sometimes been made that the Mosaic faith exemplifies a practical or incipient monotheism, that although there is at this stage no explicit denial of the existence of other gods, the germ of monotheism is already present” (The History and Religion of Israel 34). Elmer Mould reasons along with Anderson to a fundamental logical conclusion, that the mystical religious experience of Moses occurred at Midian a sacred mountain, connected to a sacred tree. It was a theophany that evoked emotion of awe and the presence of a deity who had called Abraham at Haran and led him to Canaan (126, 127). The sacred mountain of this theophany was Horeb, “the mount of EL” (the same as Sinai), which was situated near the wilderness of Midian. The sacred tree is termed a “bush”, because the word for bush (seneh) sounds so much like Sinai (Exo.3:1, 2; Deut.33:16).

Moses was warned of the sacredness of that space which shows Yahweh's presence. Moses was overwhelmed by the theophany such that Moses “hid his face...afraid to look upon
EL” (Exo. 3:6), the deity introduced himself to Moses as god of his forebears. Moses came to the conviction that the God who promised Canaan to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob was asking to be addressed as Yahweh, and that Yahweh has promised to deliver Israel from Egypt, and requires complete loyalty from Israel. Mould reached the following conclusions: “It is practically certain that Yahweh was worshipped by others than the Hebrews before he became adopted by them as their national god. He appears to have been either a Midianite deity, one of whose priests was Moses' father-in-law, or else a Kenite god” (Exo.2:16, 18; 3:1; Num. 10:29; Judges 4:11). Many scholars accept the idea that Moses had a valid religious influence from Midian. Kwesi Dickson posits thus: “The idea that the name Yahweh was not known to the Israelites before the time of Moses raises an interesting question. Since the ancestors of Israel did not call the God they worshipped by the name of Yahweh, and since the name came to Moses while in the land of Midian, could it be that Moses learnt the name from the Midianites? The evidence is not clear but it would seem that it was from them that Moses learnt of Yahweh whom he firmly believed was also the God of his ancestors” (39).

Conclusion

There is a consensus among scholars that monotheism, and indeed the worship of Yahweh did not originate from ancient Israel, and that the Jews did not teach the world on monotheism. History, archaeology and anthropology have shown that monotheistic tendencies existed in many ancient religions, and that there were some popular deities that were not tied to any special locality. Classical anthropological studies reveal the idea of the High-God theory in primitive world-view. The concept of deus remotus, or deus otiosus that is, a High-God who has abdicated his powers to lesser divinities, that is an absentee landlord was known even in West Africa (Ogunba 107). On the reason why the High-God have withdrawn from human sight, Father O’Connell attributed this to the need to protect the extreme purity of the godhead from contamination by human filth. Man is also incapable of approaching the extreme energy and radiance of the supernatural (Ogunba 107). Since the world did not learn about God from the Hebrew nation, monotheism is not indigenous to the Jews. Samuel Zwemer once restated the Calvinistic position that: “... in every man there is still a seed of religious truth and an ineradicable consciousness of God. Light is still shining in darkness and all men still retain a degree of love for truth, for justice and social order. This knowledge of God said Calvin, is innate but quickened by the manifestation of God in nature...” (98). The High-God theory pioneered by Andrew Lang nearly half a century ago was popularized and catapulted into scholarly recognition by the German anthropologist Wilhelm Schmidt. Samuel Zwemer wrote: “Through endless transformations, myths and legends, the sky-god or High-god is found at the base of all the ethnic religions in the Mediterranean area and in the Far East” (99). Andrew Lang in his The Making of Religion asserted authoritatively that: “There is no society in the world, however primitive, without any knowledge of God... of the existence of a belief in a Supreme Being, among primitive tribes there is as good evidence as we possess for any fact in the ethnographic region... certain low savages are as monotheistic as some Christians” (181-183). If all the sources cited in this study are taken serious, and if we accept the guidance of logic in an academic debate, then there is a preponderance of evidences to buttress the argument of Egyptian origin of Hebrew monotheism.

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