

## **The Law and the Prophets: Affirming or Redeeming Primal Revelation in the Old Testament**

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### **Abstract**

The questions surrounding the relationship between the Old Testament and the cultural and primal world of the Old Testament and its environment continue to divide biblical scholars and theologians. Regardless of the sheer affinities and resemblances of beliefs, practices and languages that exist between the Old Testament and its cultural environment, some are of the opinion that the Old Testament trend within its cultural world was not derived, affected, influenced or tainted by its neighbors. Others are also of the view that the Old Testament was directly derived and influenced by its environment. Thus, how the questions of the apparent affinities between primal revelation on one hand and the Old Testament on the other hand have been resolved and being resolved is what this paper seeks to re-engage.

**Keywords:** Israel and her neighbors, Primal religion and the Old Testament, Religious affinities between the Old Testament and its environment, the uniqueness of Israel's faith.

## **I Introduction – Questions at Issue**

The assertion that “the predominant trend in the Old Testament is not a derivation from the ancient Near East, but an originality within that cultural world”, continues to provoke intellectual reactions from scholars and theologians of the field of biblical studies and scholars who have relevant knowledge of the history and culture of the biblical world. The questions stimulated by this assertion are critical and timeless.

The lingering question is whether the Old Testament itself is truly not a derivation from its primal and cultural environment. In the first place, what the phrase ‘not a derivation’ in relation to the Old Testament and its primal and cultural world means is also worth asking. However, ‘the core questions’ are, did the primal world of the ancient Near East directly or indirectly produce the Old Testament or some aspects of the Old Testament revelation? Or, is the Old Testament radically unique and entirely different in form and content, and was not in anyway influenced and informed by the cultural and primal environment of the ancient Near East? Or, what is the relationship between the Old Testament and its primal and cultural environment?

Again, how do we reconcile the history and source of those who were known as “the people of the Old Testament, that is, the Hebrews with their status, requirements and responsibilities as the elect and chosen people and all the other races mentioned in the Old Testament? Did Israel’s past and environment influence them as the chosen and elect among the many? How different were the demands, requirements, and prospects of their status to that of their neighbors? How did they understand their status and privileges, and the consequences that befell them in their failures? What cultural challenges and threats did their neighbors pose to them? And how did they relate, react and respond to their neighbors’ cultural challenges and threats?

Putting all of these together in relation to the questions bordering on the originality of the “predominant trend” in the Old Testament, Bright’s caution in addressing the issue from whichever perspective is a timeless reminder:

The evidence adduced thus far makes it clear that in attempting to describe how the people in Israel came into being we must at all cost avoid over simplification. One might gain the impression from the Bible that Israel arose by a simple genealogical process: twelve sons of Jacob with their families, seventy souls in all (Gen.46: 27), went down into Egypt, and having grown there to a great Multitude, all marched out, wandered in a body through the desert also fell upon Palestine, and took it. But it was not so simple. The Bible also offers evidence that the

people Israel was formed by a Complex process and included components of exceedingly diverse origin.<sup>1</sup>

Clearly Bright has shown that even from the Bible where one reads about the most authentic source of the emergence and formation of Israel, the trend is both simple and complex. These two must be held in tension in order to avoid a one-sided approach to the subject of the originality of the predominant trend in the Old Testament. In this regard, Bright has somehow fully endorsed the questions raised in this paper and as well implicitly proposed more. But at the same time he has proposed a critical historical, cultural and scientific approach towards the resolution of the questions.

The predominant trend in the Old Testament which is by and large embodied in the faith and life of the people of Israel has over the years been studied from different perspectives and given different interpretations by different schools of thought. In fact, the various approaches to the biblical faith of the Old Testament and its predominant trend could be described first of all as the 'simple approach'. In this approach, one only considers the evidence in the biblical canon of the Old Testament as the main and sufficient source of information on the subject matter and probably discards other sources perceived as presenting contrary and opposing views against biblical evidence.<sup>2</sup>

The 'complex approach' on the other hand could be described as that scholarly orientation that discusses the subject from the perspective of historical evolution.<sup>3</sup> From this perspective, the faith and religion of the Old Testament is described in terms of man's gradual growth in the apprehension of the Divine. And the real meaning of the Old Testament is explained by means of the metaphor of growth derived from biology,<sup>4</sup> and a discovery of those primitive ideals and notions of lower value from which the higher values have evolved.<sup>5</sup> Therefore this complex approach or metaphor of growth treats the Old Testament material and religion as emanating from the pagan environment in which it arose.<sup>6</sup>

It is against this background that Wright commented:

Consequently, it is not uncommon to describe the early literature of Israel by means of the lowest theological denominator. The anthropomorphism of Adams and Eve story, for example, must be primitive and we are entitled to read into

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<sup>1</sup> John Bright, *A History of Israel*, Third Edition (London: SCM Press, 1960), p.133.

<sup>2</sup> Bright, *A History of Israel*, p.33.

<sup>3</sup> G. Ernest Wright, *The Old Testament Against its Environment* (London: SCM Press Ltd., 1962), pp.9-10.

<sup>4</sup> Wright, *The Old Testament Against its Environment*, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> Wright, *The Old Testament Against its Environment*, p. 10.

<sup>6</sup> Wright, *The Old Testament Against its Environment*, p. 10.

it all sorts of crude notions simply because we must make room for growth and development. The story of Jacob's wrestling with the angel in Gen. 32: 24ff betrays its primitive origin, and thus can be regarded as a piece of chauvinistic patriotism proving to the Israelites that eventually his nation would prevail over all others in spite of....<sup>7</sup>

The persuasion and direction of the complex approach or the developmental approach to the understanding and interpretation of the Old Testament faith is clear in the words of Bright. But he seems to be suggesting a third approach to the subject when he hinted that, the metaphor of growth method to the study of the Bible has produced not only new and more healthier attitude towards the study of Biblical History, but has also produced a mind that misinterprets the Bible because it lays emphasis upon the process of human discovery rather than revelation, and on gradual evolution instead of mutation. This method with its obvious weakness cannot be entirely set aside in favour of the others.<sup>8</sup>

In these statements, Wright as well as Bright are agreeing on a method that will seek a healthy and lasting dialogue between the simple or Biblical and the complex or evolutionary approaches to the history, faith and life of the Old Testament.<sup>9</sup> Though they both seek to benefit from the fruits of archeology and historical critical scholarship to validate and authenticate the history of the religion of Israel, they also condemned the attempt by certain scholars to explain "all" phenomena within the Bible from the point of view of evolution or perceive the God of Israel as evolving from the gods of the nations, or Israelite's monotheism evolving from pagan polytheism,<sup>10</sup> or using environment and growth as main clues to the understanding of the real meaning of Israel's achievements. Therefore, for the purposes of the issues this paper is seeking to grapple with, that is, the predominant trend in the Old Testament as 'underived' from the Ancient Near East, but originality within that cultural world, the arguments that will be presented will solely seek to advance and defend the facts from the Bible and ancient Near East history and culture, in support and throwing light on why the predominant trends in the Old Testament are original and 'underived'.

This does not however mean that theories, discoveries, facts and significant data from other fields of learning and scholarship will not at all be featured in the discourse. But the fact still remains that a mere description of an evolutionary process cannot provide explanation for matters which belong to the realm of religious faith. Moreover the development of ideas and

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<sup>7</sup> Wright, *The Old Testament Against its Environment*, p. 10.

<sup>8</sup> Wright, *The Old Testament Against its Environment*, p.10.

<sup>9</sup> Wright, *The Old Testament Against its Environment*, p. 11; Bright, *A History of Israel*, p. 33.

<sup>10</sup> Wright, *The Old Testament Against its Environment*, p.12.

hypothesis was not anything that biblical writers set out to do because that cannot create a community of faith, and a people of God.<sup>11</sup>

The miracle of grace as a result of which Israel became a nation with such a strong faith in God was not a reality that the prophets invented because it existed before them and will continue to exist after them. Therefore, sociology, the environment, and other fields, of human learning cannot by any stretch of imagination explain this reality.<sup>12</sup> This is so because the Old Testament itself bears open witness to how the environment in which Israel entered and existed was dangerous, destructive and disintegrative with all its civilization and progress.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, to presume that Israel's equipment, endowments, talents and tendencies were influenced by her environment and neighbors cannot be acceptable on the basis of the evidence and witnesses of the Old Testament itself. In respect of this, Wright further noted:

It has been assumed that a considerable proportion of Israel's allegedly unique contributions to religion were not of her own discovery. She borrowed from the many sources and her uniqueness consisted in the alterations and improvements which she imposed upon what was borrowed. But what led to these "alteration" and "improvement"? Why is this question not examined? I find it necessary to agree with W. Eichrodt when he says that the source of the difficulty lies in the inability of the developmental hypothesis to take seriously the story of God's revelation and covenant at Sinai. Thus no fixed starting point is provided for the unfolding of Israel's knowledge of God. Even Wellhausen, a respected scholar of the developmental history, often used to admit that why Chemosh of Moab never became the god of righteousness and the creator of heaven and earth, is a question to which one can give no satisfactory answer.<sup>14</sup>

Given the issues and facts of the subject matter, I would like to examine the areas of beliefs, practices, and attitudes that manifest the uniqueness and affinities of Israel's faith and that of her neighbors.

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<sup>11</sup> Wright, *The Old Testament Against its Environment*, p. 13.

<sup>12</sup> Wright, *The Old Testament Against its Environment*, p. 13.

<sup>13</sup> Wright, *The Old Testament Against its Environment*, p. 13.

<sup>14</sup> Wright, *The Old Testament Against its Environment*, p. 15.

## II. Israel and Her Neighbors: A People of Common Primal Religious and Cultural Heritage

The centre of the Old Testament around which all life revolved is the object of its faith. That is, the deity that is worshipped and considered as basic consideration upon which all other considerations hang. The ancient Near Eastern culture in which the Old Testament sprang was a world well advanced and experienced in matters of spirituality and polytheism. In Egypt, Mesopotamia, Palestine-Syria and Babylon, the forces and powers of the universe had been distinguished and the category of personality applied to them. The gods were known, understood, encountered and worshipped not by rational analysis but through experience as a necessity for cosmic stability, prosperity and human existence.<sup>15</sup>

There were complex temple structures, erected altars and sanctuaries where religious rites were being carried out as part of life in all Semitic holy places. In Phoenicia and Syria, though the oldest temples which have been well preserved date back only to the Hellenistic period, they certainly carry on traditions very parallel to ancient styles.<sup>16</sup> The movement of the universe and cosmological functions were not conceived and experienced in terms of abstraction and logic. The meaning of existence and its requirements and interpretations were not based on systematic reasons but determined by divine events and acts which involved life and death in its responses and decision-making in life's struggles.<sup>17</sup>

Times and seasons and events and processes in the phenomenal world were conceived as outcomes predetermined by the gods and their powers and forces which are beyond the control and manipulation of man. Thus man has to discover their wills and ways in order to achieve their pleasure. The forces of nature were personalities who could occasion immorality and tragedy. They have energies by which they could create order and chaos and force their will on mortals. Since they possess hidden depth in their personality and seek to socialize as well, they become responsible for the growing complexity of civilized life. The confusions and chaos were also prevalent in the Kingdom of the gods and manifest very often in the nature thereby making the distinction between reality and the force behind it almost impossible. Because places of worship, sites for altars, the choice of high places, kinds of objects of power sacred elements, and so on are natural things, the gods could inhabit, employ or choose them for their purposes.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Wright, *The Old Testament Against its Environment*, p.17.

<sup>16</sup> Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions vol. 2* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1965), pp. 274-5.

<sup>17</sup> Theodore H. Robinson, *A History of Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1948), p. 342

<sup>18</sup> Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (London: Darton, Longman and Stodd, 1988), pp.275-77.

### III. The Uniqueness of Israel's Faith

Consequently myth became to the polytheist the cloak of authoritative truth by which people in the Ancient Near East identified themselves with the powers in order to secure integration of social existence with the activity of nature. Mythopoeetry therefore became the means of explaining matters which troubled the intellect, and the universal facts of life to which man must adjust himself.<sup>19</sup>

However, in encountering the Old Testament which is a material produced within that polytheistic milieu, the reader is presented with an absolutely different spiritual atmosphere proding totally different answers to humanity's fundamental problem. These answers and responses to the basic and universal question of man are a departure from the mythopoetical understanding of the Ancient Near East. In the words of Frankfort as quoted by Wright the distinction in the conception of nature and God in Hebrew theology is set out in the following words:

When we read in Psalm 19 that the heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handiwork; we hear a voice which mocks the beliefs of Egyptians and Babylonians. The heavens which were to the psalmist but a witness of God's greatness, were to the Mesopotamians the very majesty of godhead, the highest ruler, Anu. To Egyptians the heavens signified the mystery of the divine mother through whom man was reborn. In Egypt and Mesopotamia the divine was comprehended as immanent: the gods were in nature, The Egyptians saw in the sun all that a man may know of the creator; the Mesopotamians viewed the sun as the god Shamash, the guarantor of justice. But to the psalmist the Sun was God's devoted servant who is a bridegroom coming out of his chamber and rejoiceth as a strong man to run a race. The God of the psalmist and the prophets was not in nature. He transcended nature and transcended, likewise, the realm of mythopoetic thought....<sup>20</sup>

The theology proper of Psalm 19, therefore did not only present Yahweh as creator and owner of the universe but the sovereign creator of life and inanimate who lives outside nature, whilst nature does not exist outside Yahweh. To whom is ascribed all glory and majesty and before whom the heavens and their elements shine and dazzle in their beauty and power in praise to

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<sup>19</sup> Wright, *The Old Testament Against its Environment*, p. 29.

<sup>20</sup> Pederson, *Israel: Its Life and Culture*, p. 20.

Yahweh.<sup>21</sup> What the psalmist seeks to press home is the fact that the visible heavens in their capacity, content, power and influence demonstrate or make it evident and undeniable to all men of reason and sense that they represent the most legible book, wherein he that is even running may read the glory and eternal power of the Godhead. Therefore it would be ridiculous to deny or doubt them as it is esteemed ridiculous to think of far meaner work of art as a house or a book that were made without an artist, or without a hand. But the firmament and its furniture show the handiwork of God. They did not come by chance or spring up on their own or deserved to be worshipped or deified but were made to serve the purposes of the almighty God.<sup>22</sup>

Contrary therefore to the prevalent mythopoetic conception of God, the Old Testament unequivocally denies a derivation or influence from that, but affirms a radical departure from that conception of God. The Mesopotamian and Egyptian gods were not only in nature but are products of nature. Their very existence depends on nature just as nature's existence rather depends on the Old Testament God and out of whom nature proceeded. Many have argued that, the God of the patriarchs who later revealed himself to Moses as "Yahweh" was already known by that name in the pre-Mosaic times.<sup>23</sup> This claim may be due to the Yahwistic, Elohist, and Priestly sources which lay behind the Torah.<sup>24</sup>

But of all the three sources, only the "P" sources affirm that the name Yahweh was revealed only to Moses first, and not before Moses. This is to reject any claim that the name was being used and already known by the cults of the ancient Near Eastern cosmos.<sup>25</sup> That name is not a mere convenient label, but an effective expression of the nature of the being named, and the revelation of a new name of God which represents a new beginning in religion. Certain manuscripts families in the "E" and "P" sources confirmed that such a new beginning was brought about through the work of Moses.<sup>26</sup> Thus, it was never known nor seen before.

"Tradition still indicates that the Exodus group first got to know the God Yahweh in connection with the liberation by Moses".<sup>27</sup> Even though it could be assumed that before Moses the people in their slavery were involved in the worship of family, or Egyptian or other Semitic gods in the region, what came as a result of the liberation from Egypt was a unique and extraordinarily

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<sup>21</sup> Charles A. Briggs and Emile G. Briggs, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark Ltd, 1987), pp. 103-171; C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the OT in Ten Volumes Vol.V* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmann publishing Co. 1871), pp. 278-89; Arthur S. Peak, *A Commentary on the Bible* (New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons Limited, 1985), p. 377.

<sup>22</sup> Matthew Poole, *A commentary on the Holy Bible: Psalm-Malachi* (Pennsylvania: The Banner of Truth, 1990), p.29.

<sup>23</sup> G. W. Anderson, *The History and Religion of Israel* (Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 32

<sup>24</sup> Anderson, *The History and Religion of Israel*, p.32.

<sup>25</sup> Anderson, *The History and Religion of Israel*, p.32.

<sup>26</sup> Anderson, *The History and Religion of Israel*, p.32.

<sup>27</sup> Rainer Albertz, *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament vol. 1* (Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1994), p. 49.

‘underived’ departure from their known religious ties. They were ushered into a special tie to the God Yahweh.<sup>28</sup>

### **i. Yahweh and the Gods**

The Yahweh revealed to the population of the twelve tribes in slavery whose act secured their release from bondage, and subsequently defeated their enemies in the wilderness and provided for them and preserved them till He sent their children to the promise land was certainly different. His nature and acts displayed in nature and amongst them at all times were markedly extraordinarily from ANU, APSU, Tiamat, Zeus and Ishtar who were the reigning gods of the nations like Mesopotamia, Egypt, Akkad and Sumeria. But they were all defeated by Yahweh.<sup>29</sup>

Yahweh was not in the class of the Babylonian and Assyrian pantheon. He did not rise to supremacy as a result of struggles with Innina, Antu, Adad, Enlil or Marduk. And he is not a product of the mythological concoctions of the ancient world,<sup>30</sup> but the God who revealed himself to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the past as God almighty, who also revealed himself as Yahweh, I AM WHO I AM.<sup>31</sup> “It means that, He is the God who manifests his existence in activity ; Yahweh reveals who He is by what He does; and by this revelation will continue in what he does for his people from generation to generation”.<sup>32</sup>

One cannot blindly claim that the metaphors of nature which were applied to Yahweh in his activities of redemption in favoring Israel were borrowed from ancient universal epics. Baal of Canaan would be described as riding on a cherub or on the cloud uttering peals of thunder and sending out lightening.<sup>33</sup> The experience of a prolonged foreign domination of Babylon, Assyria or Israel may both be attributed to the works of immorality and sin. But the fact is that the religious conceptions of these natural and moral phenomena in Israel are totally different to that of the nations.

The gods of the nations do not transcend the clouds and the lightening; they are in them and they are the very elements of the cosmos. They cannot be separated from them. But Israel’s God, on the other hand, was perceived as the creator and owner of these elements whose command they obey. And he transcends them all. Sin amongst the nations simply means failure to follow cult observances, breach of taboo or a conscious or unconscious moral offences committed against

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<sup>28</sup> Albertz, *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament* , p.49.

<sup>29</sup> S. H. Hooke, *Babylonian and Assyrian Religion* (London: Hutchinson’s University Press, 1953), p. 24.

<sup>30</sup> Hooke, *Babylonian and Assyrian Religion*, pp. 24-25.

<sup>31</sup> Victor H. Mathews, *A Brief History of Ancient Israel* (London: John Knox press, 2002), p. 6.

<sup>32</sup> Hooke, *Babylonian and Assyrian Religion*, p. 34.

<sup>33</sup> Wright, *The Old Testament Against its Environment*, p. 21.

family ties and duties.<sup>34</sup> But in Israel, the worship and devotion to any of the gods of the nations and their practices constituted the gravest of sins. This is a sharp contrast to a common problem in the same environment.<sup>35</sup> Sin in Israel is disobedience to Yahweh's moral, spiritual and natural laws which he gave to Israel alone and not to the other nations.<sup>36</sup> Sin in Hebrew theology is disobedience to God's total personality revealed and his laws. It also meant corruption and poisoning of one's soul, and all such acts punishable by the God in whom all righteousness dwells.<sup>37</sup> What also set the concept of sin and its consequences apart from that of the nations is the fact that sin is inimical to life and it harms the soul. It is a breach of Yahweh's will, and offence against his honor. It kindles his jealousy and wrath but at the same time it provokes his mercy and longsuffering and love for sinners and his people.<sup>38</sup> This love and longsuffering is not found in the gods of the nations.

Therefore in spite of these applications to Yahweh of the natural functions of the gods of the nations, images and metaphors drawn from nature, they are not the primary language or concepts by which Yahweh was known.<sup>39</sup> It is interesting to note that though these metaphors of nature and the forces behind their function were things applied to Yahweh; He in most circumstances declares such natural metaphors as his enemies who will suffer his judgment, anger and destruction.<sup>40</sup>

It is also against this background that, that the very anthropomorphism of biblical vocabulary concerning God is a witness to his primary relation to history and human society as exemplified in what he did at the Exodus.<sup>41</sup> Sandmel has well captured Wright's view of the matter:

In polytheism the central and original metaphors and symbols for depicting the gods were drawn for the most part from the natural world. With Growth of social complexity the gods increasingly took on social functions.... Yet Baal of Canaan and Enlil of Mesopotamia never shook off their Primary relation to the storm which typifies nature's force. ANU, the head of the pantheon in Babylon, originated as the numinous feeling for the majesty of the sky. He was thus given form as heaven... and the Bull of heaven.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Hooke, *Babylonian and Assyrian Religion*, pp. 99-100.

<sup>35</sup> Alberty, *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament vol. 1*, p. 198.

<sup>36</sup> Alberty, *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament vol. 1*, p. 139.

<sup>37</sup> John S. Pederson, *Israel: Its Life and Culture* (London: Oxford University Press, 1940), p. 620.

<sup>38</sup> Pederson, *Israel: Its Life and Culture*, p. 621.

<sup>39</sup> Samuel Sandmel (ed.), *Old Testament Issues* (London: SCM press Ltd, 1969), p. 25.

<sup>40</sup> Sandmel, *Old Testament Issues*, p. 25.

<sup>41</sup> Sandmel, *Old Testament Issues*, p.27.

<sup>42</sup> Sandmel, *Old Testament Issues*, p.25.

But in the Bible, Yahweh is known and addressed primarily in the term which relates him to history and society. The language of nature is distinctly secondary. God is Lord, Father, mother and judge, but these appellatives are not superimposed upon Yahweh. He is not to be associated to any form, object, force and power and the reason is historical. Yahweh was so great that the Israelites acknowledged his Lordship over every phenomenon that his experience encountered. No one aspect of universe was more characteristic of Yahweh than the other. As God of heaven and earth (Gen. 24: 3), he transcends nature and history. Israel was not forced to accept these facts but by intuition and experience they came to that knowledge which was entirely different from that of the polytheists.<sup>43</sup>

The problem of life was not perceived as integration with the forces of nature, but as an adjustment to the will of the God who had elected them. The practice of idolatry of several forms and the use of images of deities were never seen in patriarchal worship. They were sheer syncretism introduced into Israel in her early stages. But official Yahwism did not adopt or adjust to the environment of the day like other nations.<sup>44</sup>

## **ii. The Law and the Prophets**

Another fact worth noting is the fact that Israel's religious Scripture was utterly different from its environment. Though the writers borrowed from all sources, they radically transformed all that they took. Therefore the centrality of their recorded revelation was history and not nature as in the other nations. Yahweh was depicted in the Old Testament scripts as using nature to accomplish his eternal intentions in history. Hence it is history and not myth, thereby distinguishing Israel's God from that of the nations, a mutation which cannot be comprehended by the metaphor of growth.<sup>45</sup>

According to the Old Testament poets, the religion of Israel suddenly breaks into history with a mythopoetic approach to the universe. Its foundation was established far back in Sinai in the history of Yahweh's program of redeeming Israel. These data and elements in the Old Testament records are independent of developments and processes in Egypt and Mesopotamia, though the Old Testament is ignored and presented by some as if it is not self-contained and not isolated from the rest of the ancient Near East.<sup>46</sup> But arguments for or against the sources, authorship, dating, nature and compositions of the Jewish Bible have not practically and historically affected the integrity of the spirit and centrality of the Old Testament. Jewish religious commentaries and expositions of the Torah contained in the Targums and the Talmud affirm the historicity and

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<sup>43</sup> Wright, *The Old Testament Against its Environment*, p.26.

<sup>44</sup> Wright, *The Old Testament Against its Environment*, p. 26.

<sup>45</sup> Wright, *The Old Testament Against its Environment*, p. 23-26.

<sup>46</sup> H. Barrel lance, *The Old Testament and the Archeologist* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1961),pp.4-5.

uniqueness of the Old Testament in content and form compared to all the ancient religious texts containing myths and epics of the ancient worlds.<sup>47</sup>

Clearly the writers of the Old Testament scriptures emphasized in the most forceful terms the power of Yahweh the one who reigns forever and before whom everything in heaven and earth is impotent. The worship of other gods in the Old Testament meant weakness, trouble, and defeat for the worshippers. The writers in Israel were not just unconcerned about the existence of foreign and strange gods but were also not afraid to admit that their ancestors once honored foreign gods.<sup>48</sup>

It is against this background that difficult parts of the Old Testament like Psalm 82, was still maintained in the canon and no attempt had been made to label it as extra canonical or as a foreign insertion despite its apparent hermeneutical problems. But for whatever interpretation advanced so far which is beyond the scope of this paper, it is clear in Hebrew theology that Yahweh has the power to summon and employ the gods of the nations to further his will. No other god could do or has ever done this. He has the sovereign authority to indict them and condemn them to destruction and disgrace because he does not need them, and to him they are redundant. The exaltation of God in Israel led to the devaluation of all other powers. Therefore as presented in the Hebrew scripture, the monotheism of the Hebrews was not derived from philosophical speculation concerning the one and the many but from a knowledge of God's power expressed in powerful acts.<sup>49</sup> Therefore throughout the Old Testament literature, the writers and poets of Israel affirmed that:

It was by the power of this one God that a people without law were given a law, that the several tribes and extraneous clans became one nation....The gods of the nations were deride as "no-gods", there is no abstraction or metaphysical emphasis on the existence or non-existence of these gods, but instead the emphasis is on their lack of power to do anything. And a god without power was unworthy of any consideration other than derision.<sup>50</sup>

As a result of this knowledge and experience of the awareness of God the measure of which the nations have not encountered, the writers and interpreters of Hebrew law and history expressed what they knew more by means of picture story and metaphors than they did by language of abstraction.<sup>51</sup> Hence the doctrine of a chosen people by God for his possession above all the people that are on the face of the earth as the focal point of the Scripture of Israel, is one of the

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<sup>47</sup> Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible* (Michigan Baker Books, 1996), pp. 379,232,403.

<sup>48</sup> J. Andrew Bearman, *Religion and Culture in Ancient Israel* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1992) p. 35.

<sup>49</sup> Wright, *The Old Testament Against its Environment*, pp. 38-39.

<sup>50</sup> Wright, *The Old Testament Against its Environment*, p. 59.

<sup>51</sup> Wright, *The Old Testament Against its Environment*, p. 42.

factors setting it apart from all the religions ever known in human religious history. As noted by Wright:

The peculiarly Israelite point of view toward the apprehension of the Divine Is to be seen, not primarily in abstract discussion of the merits of the one over Against the many, but in fact that the God of the Bible is the first of all and preeminently the God of Israel.<sup>52</sup>

Another distinction inherent in the Old Testament that is not found in the polytheistic cultures of the ancient world is the calling ministry of the prophets of Israel. In this regard, the words of the Herschel might hold a timeless description on the subject in comparison to that of the nations. He wrote:

In the prophets of Israel we may trace similarities and parallels to personalities To be encountered elsewhere, since indeed the religion of the Hebrews shared much with other Semitic religions. It is therefore important to compare them with other types of men of ancient history who made similar claims. Yet the more difficult question is: what are the features that set the prophets of Israel apart? What constitutes their uniqueness? The prophet is not only a prophet, he is also a poet, preacher, patriot, statesman, social critic, and moralist. There has been the tendency to see the essence of prophecy in the display of one or another, these aspects yet this is a misapprehension of the intrinsic nature of prophecy.<sup>53</sup>

Herschel's conception of the uniqueness of the calling and function of the prophets of Israel is further illuminated in Wright's words that, "the prophets were direct spokesmen or heralds of the divine Lord, they created extraordinary atmosphere of social and political reform entirely unknown in polytheistic circles."<sup>54</sup> This is because ancient Egypt for instance offers very little evidence of prophets as inspired speakers of divine oracles.<sup>55</sup> The mode and practice of divination through magic, incantation, astrology in Babylon, Persia, Egypt and many parts of the ancient near Eastern environment was totally different and strange in Israel.<sup>56</sup> The practice of necromancy, and the use of mediums and were vehemently condemned by the prophets of Israel as sin against Yahweh punishable by death.<sup>57</sup>

Unlike the nations, the functions of the prophets of Israel was to proclaim specific message of all times under all circumstances, that is, the message and requirements of Israel's election as

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<sup>52</sup> Wright, *The Old Testament Against its Environment*, p. 42.

<sup>53</sup> Abraham J. Herschel, *The Prophets* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. xiv.

<sup>54</sup> Wright, *The Old Testament Against its Environment*, p. 46.

<sup>55</sup> John D. Currid, *Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament* (Michigan: Baker Books, 1997), p. 220.

<sup>56</sup> Currid, *Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament*, pp. 221-222.

<sup>57</sup> Currid, *Ancient Egypt and the Old Testament*, p. 222.

enshrined in the covenant as people elected by God. Therefore in interpretations and reinterpretations of the covenant or in the law from time to time the meaning and aims of Israel's existence was highlighted.<sup>58</sup>

As required by the law and as an expression of the gracious blessings and responsibilities of "the elected" out of all the families of the earth, Israel must see all as equal before the law. They must defend the poor, the weak and the defenseless amongst them. They must not give loan with interest and above all no one must own another Israelite as a slave in Israel. These are social, responsible and humane practices not known before in the nations surrounding Israel.<sup>59</sup>

The prophets protested against social injustices in the form of bribery, corruption, wickedness, slavery, oppression of the weak and subversion of the law in favor of the rich. These were proclaimed openly and fearlessly against the background of the covenant and history. Thus righteousness and grace of God were united in a way unknown elsewhere. Other religious traditions know the power, holiness and goodness of God, but righteousness that protects and loves the weak and the oppressed, a mercy and righteousness directed toward those whom the world's justice passes by is a phenomenal uniqueness.<sup>60</sup>

Also the Kings of Egypt and Mesopotamia served as mediators of the gods and society. They harmonized the life of the community and the world. They were seen as appointees and servants of gods who must maintain the unity of the secular and the sacred. In Israel the Kings were seen as chosen by Yahweh and spoke as sons of Yahweh but they were never deified like the Kings of the nations. They were appointed and ordained by God to protect the people from their enemies, maintain the right of the poor and secure social order in righteousness: they were not divine, not worshipped, not infallible, not autocratic, not and above criticism.<sup>61</sup> The Kings of Israel inherited the Law, they did not make laws.

The law was prior to kingship and was given in connection with the covenant to the whole people. The Kings could claim no credit to it. They could only administer it. Therefore the law in relation to the whole of Israel's religious text was an oracle that formed an integral part of a continuous unfolding of a special activity of the divine reality. The laws were not isolated, occasional and unrelated utterances given in response to selfish benefit.<sup>62</sup> The uniqueness of the laws the Kings ministered was without parallel anywhere, it was not founded on dreams,

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<sup>58</sup> Wright, *The Old Testament Against its Environment*, p. 58.

<sup>59</sup> Wright, *The Old Testament Against its Environment*, p. 59.

<sup>60</sup> Wright, *The Old Testament Against its Environment*, p. 60.

<sup>61</sup> Wright, *The Old Testament Against its Environment*, pp. 63, 65, 64.

<sup>62</sup> Wright, *The Old Testament Against its Environment*, p. 67.

achievements, temples, descendants and wars but only on Yahweh. This law which is incomplete in itself will be fulfilled in the coming Messiah, the son of David.<sup>63</sup>

### **iii. The Law and the Prophets on Spirits, Festivals and Sacrifices**

A few other aspects that this paper will like to touch regarding the uniqueness of Israel amongst her neighbors in conclusion are: spirits, festivals and sacrifices. The world of polytheism in which Israel found herself used and devoted themselves to demons, m magic and divination as means of influencing nature and the gods. These were figures of lions, snakes, bulls and all sorts of creatures which served as guardians of gates and the community at large. All kinds of monstrous demonic features and portrayal of loins were prominent. Composite and grotesque creatures with two heads, human and animal or the scorpion-bird-man were used as bases for deities in Mesopotamia, Ugarit, Egypt.<sup>64</sup>

The movement of stars and the whole planetary systems were carefully studied in order to discover their relationship with human life. The mysterious powers of the Zodiac and the whole cult of astrology originated in the same environment. The quest was to maintain stability, coherence, order and integration in human life and society. These magical rites and cultic techniques were means of explaining abnormalities and imperfection in life.<sup>65</sup>

It must be emphasized that though Israel shared the same environment and the same quest for discovering the divine will for the same purposes, her life was free from this sort of mythopoetic beliefs and practices of her neighbors. The God of Israel as proclaimed by her prophets and poets is not like Baal, Anat or Marduk. The God of Israel is not renewed by the cult. He is the Living God who exists and is present amongst His people in all circumstances; He transcends life and death.<sup>66</sup> And in His laws to Israel, He categorically and unequivocally declared His opposition to and disgust with the belief, believers and practitioners of mediums, divination, magic and the rest, (Lev. 17-26; 20: 6, 23-27; Exodus 22: 18 etc).

Therefore in the Old Testament, references to demons are rare and the little gods and demons are characterized as nonsense. Not because they have no spiritual power but they are considered as beings whose divinations, spells and incantations cannot prevail over Israel (Num 23:15ff.). Festivals which are also of religious significance in the ancient oriental world were celebrated in Israel as remembrance of indebtedness to God. They gave the first-fruits of their harvest as

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<sup>63</sup> Esther Keller, *The Background to the Old Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1963), pp. 198-199.

<sup>64</sup> Martin Noth, *The Old Testament* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1964). Pp. 197-199.

<sup>65</sup> Wright, *The Old Testament Against its Environment*, pp. 84-85.

<sup>66</sup> Th C. Vriezen, *An Outline of Old Testament Theology* (Massachusetts: Charles T. Branford Company 1962), pp.182-183.

offering to maintain the worship of Yahweh.<sup>67</sup> But behind the festivals of the pagan world lay the conception of the roles and the demonstrations of the powers of the numerous gods in nature.

The cult festivals in Mesopotamia and Canaan were centered on the activities of the gods in creation, divine battles and the myths of the death and revival of god. In their festival rites, the sense of the recreation anew the orderly world in the battle against chaos and securing the revival of nature is re-enacted. The role of the State and kings reached its peak in their festival rites.

They were concerned with basically the miracle of renewal, the triumph over death and bondage, liberation of the gods, secured marriages between the gods and the determination of the destiny of the ensuing year. But in Israel, official festivals of normative Yahwism had no such rites. Festivals like the Passover, Pentecost the feast of unleavened bread, the Sabbath, the Day of atonement and the new moon only possessed historical and commemorative significance.<sup>68</sup> These festivals were celebrated to commemorate the liberation of the people from Egypt and to offer thanksgiving to God for the yield of the earth, sea and water.<sup>69</sup> Hebrew festivals were a testimony to the power and grace of God -- not an attempt or a ritual by means of magic, gifts, and flatteries intended to coerce the gods to act in accordance with human will. The practice of sacrifices amongst the Israelites and their neighbors also shows a vast contrast between the two worlds comparatively. In polytheism, the gods enjoyed both prayers and gifts just as their human counterparts. The gods also lived in special houses, ate special foods, and had their servants because they must be cared for. Banquets and sacrifices were carried out to obtain favour, assistance and miracles of all kinds from the gods.

But in the Old Testament one can notice just a little of these practice. Texts that suggest the performance of sacrifices or contain the language of sacrifices like God smelling the sweet savor of a burning sacrifice and expressions such as “sweet savor unto God” were common and technical in Levitical terminology. Therefore anthropomorphism in Israel did not extend to the conception of God eating sacrificial offerings. This understanding and attitude characterized the Language of sacrifice and offerings to God in Israelite religious consciousness and writings of religious texts in Israel regarding Yahweh and sacrifices. Therefore to contend that Israel and her ‘religio-cultural’ heritage are original amidst other ancient Near Eastern ‘religio-cultural’ world cannot be said to be a fallacy.

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<sup>67</sup> John Drane, *The Old Testament Story: An Illustrated Documentary* (Icknield Way: Lion Publishing plc. 1983), p. 30.

<sup>68</sup> Wright, *The Old Testament Against its Environment*, p. 94.

<sup>69</sup> Wright, *The Old Testament Against its Environment*, pp. 100-101.

## **Conclusion**

In view of the foregoing, particularly in respect of the sheer affinities and resemblances between Israel's faith and life and that of her neighbors – the question of how to account for the affinities by adopting the position of 'originality' may be misleading particularly in matters of this nature which are considered as belonging to the realms of mystery. Also, adopting the view that the Old Testament is either affirming or redeeming primal revelation may also constitute an acknowledgement of a debate in which no conclusion has ever been reached. The way forward would forever remain an exercise of faith and scholarship.

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