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Trends of the Portrayal of Yahweh in the Hebrew Bible

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Trends of the Portrayal of Yahweh in the Hebrew Bible

KENNETH PRICE

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Dr. Heidi Wendt

Dr. Wendt notes that Kenneth's paper examines alternating depictions of Yahweh (the god of the Israelites) in a variety of biblical texts. The quantity of primary evidence that he considers is impressive in its own right, but he also controls and explicates these examples masterfully. His exegetical skills and appreciation of more technical interpretive issues are evident throughout the paper, as is his facility with the academic approach to biblical literature that was emphasized throughout the course. At the same time, Kenneth's observations and analysis are never short on creativity. He also developed an elegant scholarly voice over the course of the semester and effectively revised sections of this paper in response to feedback provided on an earlier draft.

Yahweh is arguably the most important figure of the Hebrew Bible. He serves as the unifying factor in all of the books of the Hebrew Bible, whether it be through giving commands, inspiring prophets, or acting on his own. However, throughout the Hebrew Bible, Yahweh's portrayal changes over time as Israelite historical circumstances change and more texts are written and eventually added to the canon. The general trend of Yahweh's portrayal is that he goes from being one deity amongst other deities, with limited but great capabilities, to a sole deity who has omnipotence and omniscience. This will be shown through an examination of several passages throughout the Hebrew Bible.

The Yahweh of Genesis is a potent deity, but one who has very limited power in many situations. In Genesis, Yahweh initially creates the world, everything that lives in it, and eventually humans. While the Yahweh of Genesis is potent, he seems to have limited perception, for instance. In the Garden of Eden, Yahweh has trouble locating Adam and Eve after they consume the fruit from the tree: "But Yahweh God called to the man, and said to him, 'where are you?'" (Genesis 3:9). A similar example of Yahweh's limited capabilities is his wrestling match with Jacob. While Yahweh has great power, he is unable to overcome Jacob (Genesis 32:22-31). The wrestling match with Jacob and the search for Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden show that Yahweh also has the capability to assume a human form.

Exodus shows us a Yahweh who has great capabilities to influence human events, but he has human qualities. The Yahweh of Exodus has his capabilities expanded even more, but it continues to portray a Yahweh who is not omniscient: "God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (Exodus 2:24). This is an interesting verse because it suggests that if Yahweh were to remember something, it would mean that he had forgotten about the covenants of the past at some point. This is a vastly different portrayal of Yahweh's knowledge than that which exists in later works. In Exodus, Yahweh is not a being who has planned all history, he is merely a powerful being who can have influence upon events. This differs greatly from later works, such as

Isaiah, which indicate a belief that Yahweh has a plan for all of human history.

It also seems as though Yahweh's capabilities as shown through Moses are, to a limited extent, able to be replicated by other humans. It is unclear if the replication of the initial signs and wonders by Pharaoh's court religious experts is done with the aid of another deity. Exodus also has major displays of Yahweh's power in the form of the plagues (Exodus 7-11). These capabilities include turning water to blood, a plague of frogs, a plague of gnats, a plague of flies, a plague of diseased livestock, boils, thunder and hail, locusts, and the final plague of the first born. The plagues are largely about influencing nature in various ways, either with creatures, disease, or weather phenomena. Yahweh has also been shown to have such powers in Genesis, such as the story of Noah and the great flood (Genesis 7-8).

The other significant facet of Yahweh's power in Exodus seems to be the ability to alter the mind of Pharaoh. As it says many times throughout the plagues, "But Yahweh hardened Pharaoh's heart." This shows a Yahweh who is able to manipulate and shape human emotions in addition to his more visible signs, such as the plagues. The extent to which Yahweh is able to do this is not made explicit in Exodus, as he does not directly influence the minds of the Hebrews, but it seems to be sufficient for Yahweh's objectives in Exodus.

The final plague, the death of the firstborn, is also interesting in trying to understand the capabilities of Yahweh as portrayed in Exodus. Rather than being omniscient and being able to only kill Egyptians, Yahweh requires a sign from the Hebrews in the form of lambs' blood in order to not slay those first born: "For Yahweh will pass through to strike down the Egyptians; when he sees the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, Yahweh will pass over that door" (Exodus 12:23). This limitation of Yahweh's capabilities contrasts with later writings such as Isaiah which make claims of omnipotence.

Concerning Yahweh's status as a deity, there are the Pharaoh's court religious experts who are able to perform some of the same

acts as Moses. Whether their capabilities are provided by another deity or not is unclear. The most interesting statement concerning Yahweh's status is "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3). The fact that other gods are mentioned at all implies that Yahweh is not the sole deity. This portrayal of a prophet being opposed by another religious authority, that is Moses and Pharaoh's court religious experts, is similar in some ways to the later confrontation between Elijah and the prophets of Baal in First Kings. In this later portrayal, written by the Deuteronomic authors, the idea that another deity could exist to empower prophets is dismissed and mocked quite explicitly: "Cry aloud! Surely he is a god; either he is meditating, or he has wandered away, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened" (First Kings 18:27). While Exodus does show that Moses, empowered by Yahweh, is greater than Pharaoh's court religious experts, it is noteworthy to point out that the court religious experts could replicate some of the signs and wonders demonstrated by Moses and that it is merely unclear whether or not another deity is enabling the powers of the court religious experts rather than the more explicit dismissal of the possibility of another deity that is present in First Kings.

Although there are similarities between Yahweh's portrayal in Deuteronomy and the other books of the Torah, Deuteronomy departs significantly in the portrayal of Yahweh's nature and his abilities. However, the significance of Deuteronomy in the context of Yahweh's capabilities and status is expressed in "Hear, O Israel: Yahweh is our God, Yahweh alone" (Deuteronomy 6:4). This is the first statement in the Hebrew Bible to suggest the possibility that no deities other than Yahweh exist. This monotheistic statement is a departure from the portrayal of Yahweh's status in comparison to the rest of the Torah, which mentions other gods and explicitly prohibits the worship of other deities. However, Deuteronomy also mentions the same commandment to worship no other gods before Yahweh (Deuteronomy 5:7). The fact that they are referred to as "other gods" instead of specifying idols or false deities suggests that while the Deuteronomic authors wanted to promote Yahweh as the sole deity, they were not fully committed to a portrayal of Yahweh in this way.

In Joshua, Yahweh's capabilities shift from those portrayed in the Torah. In Exodus, Yahweh works primarily with natural phenomena. The Yahweh of Joshua is shown to be a military deity and strategist first and foremost who gives Joshua orders as to how to take the Promised Land, such as Ai: "Then Yahweh said to Joshua, 'Do not fear or be dismayed; take all the fighting men with you, and go up now to Ai. See, I have handed over to you the king of Ai with his people, his city, and his land'" (Joshua 8:1). His capabilities here are centered around going into battle and giving victory to the Israelites.

The other capability that Yahweh shows in Joshua is the ability to reside within a physical location. This is done in the form of the Ark of the Covenant. This container is brought into battles, and thus portrays Yahweh as not only a military planner, but also as an actual force whose presence may be felt on the battlefield with those residing in Canaan: "And the armed men went before the priests who blew the trumpets; the rear guard came after the ark, while the trumpets blew continually" (Joshua 6:9). This passage shows an example of Yahweh's direct presence on the battlefield.

While Joshua introduces the concept of Yahweh as a military deity with a physical location, Judges broadens the capabilities of Yahweh further. The most significant is the mention of the Nazirites. These are humans who live a purified life free of alcohol and do not cut their hair, thus allowing Yahweh's spirit to enter the physical body of the Nazirites to perform powerful deeds. This is shown in the case of Samson, where every time Samson demonstrates a great feat, it also portrays the spirit of Yahweh rushing into Sampson shortly before the feat is performed: "And the spirit of Yahweh rushed on him, and the ropes that were on his arms became like flax that has caught fire, and his bonds melted off his hands" (Judges 15:14). This may be an addition to the capabilities of Yahweh to influence humans directly, similar to hardening Pharaoh's heart in Exodus.

Yahweh is also shown in a new role to the Israelites in Judges. Not only is he a military deity, he is also the king of the Israelites. Those who lead the Israelites do not take the title of king, but are

rather said to “Judge” Israel. This is a demonstration of Yahweh as having an exclusive relationship with the Israelites, and also demanding that the Israelites are faithful only to him. It also indicates that because Yahweh is meant to rule over the Israelites, they are not to have a human king to rule over them.

In Isaiah, the author is attempting to address a potential crisis of faith amongst the Israelites. This crisis is about the power of Yahweh and his evident lack of it following the Babylonian Exile and the fall of the First Temple. Previous writings up to this point in the Hebrew Bible have shown Yahweh to be a rather powerful being. The fall of the First Temple could be considered in an Ancient Near East context to mean that Yahweh is weak and impotent, and that the deities of other civilizations are superior. In this context, Isaiah not only reaffirms the greatness of Yahweh’s power, but gives him new traits: “Declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times thing not yet done, saying, ‘My purpose shall stand, and I will fulfill my intention’” (Isaiah 46:10). He is shown as a being with the capacity and a plan for all of human history as well, not merely the Israelites. This is made explicit in the mention of Cyrus in Isaiah. Even though Cyrus is not an Israelite, Yahweh has the ability to use Cyrus for his own ends, even going so far as to saying Cyrus is anointed by Yahweh: “Thus says Yahweh to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him” (Isaiah 45:1).

Isaiah also offers another explanation of how Yahweh is so powerful and yet his temple fell. While stating Yahweh has a plan for all of human history and the fall of his temple is part of that plan, Isaiah goes even further in adding that Yahweh has hidden himself from the world as part of his plan: “Truly, you are a God who hides himself, O God of Israel, the Savior” (Isaiah 45:15). Ultimately, these new claims about Yahweh are rooted in the need to explain how Yahweh can still be a great and powerful deity and yet the First Temple and Jerusalem fell.

While Deuteronomic authors mention monotheism, there are many passages that show that the authors may have had difficulty with this idea, such as the prohibition against worshipping other gods.

Isaiah reaffirms the monotheistic agenda of the Deuteronomic authors: “Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me” (Isaiah 43:10). Then Isaiah also states that Yahweh is omniscient and omnipotent. This book also states that Yahweh is a planning deity, who waits until certain times to reveal himself. Thus, Yahweh’s temple fell because it is part of his plan, not due to a lack of power, according to Isaiah.

As Yahweh’s portrayal changed to one of omniscience, Daniel expands on this idea. Yahweh in Daniel is portrayed as a deity who works with mysteries and secrets: “But there is a God in heaven who reveals mysteries” (Daniel 2:28). This portrayal of Yahweh is more subtle than the statements of omniscience in Isaiah, but it portrays a deity who has a great deal of knowledge, especially concerning secrets and mysteries. Also, similar to the use of Pharaoh in Genesis who received dreams from Yahweh that only Joseph was able to correctly interpret, the deity portrayed in Daniel is able to communicate with non-Israelites, such as Nebuchadnezzar, through dreams to use them for his ends.

Overall, Yahweh’s capabilities in early Hebrew Bible writings show him as a powerful but limited being. As more scripture is written, the capabilities of Yahweh change as well. He is initially a deity who has rather limited capabilities, later becomes a military deity whose primary capabilities are concerned with warfare, and finally develops into an omnipotent and omniscient deity who has a plan for all of human history. There is also a progression of Yahweh from being one deity amongst many in the Ancient Near East, to one with an exclusive relationship with a people, to being portrayed as the only deity. The ultimate trend is that Yahweh’s status and power as a deity increase as more Hebrew scripture was written.

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