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Author(s): JOSHUA L. MOSS

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# SATIRE, MONOTHEISM AND SCEPTICISM

Joshua L. Moss\*

**ABSTRACT:** The habits of mind which gave Israel's ancestors cause to doubt the existence of the pagan deities sometimes lead their descendants to doubt the existence of any personal God, however conceived. Monotheism was and is a powerful form of Scepticism. The Hebrew Bible contains notable satires of Paganism, such as Psalm 115 and Isaiah 44 with their biting mockery of idols. Elijah challenged the worshippers of Ba'al to a demonstration of divine power, using satire. The reader knows that nothing will happen in response to the cries of Baal's worshippers, and laughs. Yet, the worshippers of Israel's God must also be aware that their own cries for help often go unanswered. The insight that caused Abraham to smash the idols in his father's shop also shakes the altar erected by Elijah. Doubt, once unleashed, is not easily contained. Scepticism is a natural part of the Jewish experience. In the middle ages Jews were non-believers and dissenters as far as the dominant religions were concerned. With the advent of modernity, those sceptical habits of mind could be applied to religion generally, including Judaism. The results were volatile – and still are.

## *1. Introduction: Monotheism as Scepticism*

Monotheism is Atheism, regarding 99.9% of gods. The habits of mind which gave Israel's ancestors cause to doubt the existence of the pagan deities sometimes lead their descendants to doubt the existence of any personal God, however conceived. Monotheism was and is a powerful form of scepticism.

## *2. Doubt and Scepticism in the Bible*

Doubt is a basic mental operation for human beings as social creatures. If not for doubt, people would be completely at the mercy of swindlers, liars, and fools. We would have to do and believe whatever was suggested to us, but of course we do not. Biblical laws regarding accurate weights and measures testify to the recognition of deception and therefore the necessity of doubt.<sup>1</sup> Semantically, “doubt” must be preceded by a claim that is the object of doubt. Animals (being non-verbal) cannot experience doubt. Confusion, but not doubt.

A shrewd human being is constantly assessing the ability and inclination of claimants to tell the truth. When a claim is evaluated negatively, wholly or partially, there is the

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\* Joshua L. Moss, American Hebrew Academy, Greensboro, North Carolina, USA. Email: [jmoss@americanhebrewacademy.org](mailto:jmoss@americanhebrewacademy.org)

<sup>1</sup> “You shall not have in your pouch alternate weights, larger and smaller. You shall not have in your house alternate measures, a larger and a smaller. You must have completely honest weights and completely honest measures, if you are to endure long on the soil that the LORD your God is giving you. For everyone who does those things, everyone who deals dishonestly, is abhorrent to the LORD your God.” (Deuteronomy 25:13-16, NJPS)

<sup>2</sup> לא-יהיה לך בכיסה, אבן ואבן: גדולה, וקטנה. “לא-יהיה לך בביתך, איפה ואיפה: גדולה, וקטנה. “אבן שלמה וצדק יהיה-לך, איפה שלמה וצדק יהיה-לך--למען, ואריכו ימיה, על האדמה, אשר-ה' אלקיך נתן לך. “כי תוצבת ה' אלקיך, כל-עשה אלה: כל, עשה עול. (דברים כ"ה)

presence of doubt. Most assessments of claims will involve some measure of doubt and some measure of persuasion. Evidence is rarely unambiguous. A decided preference for doubt can be called “Scepticism.” One may be a sceptic with regard to claims in general, or a sceptic with regard to a certain realm of inquiry.<sup>2</sup>

The Hebrew Bible has no word for “doubt.” People of all biblical eras must have experienced doubt or employed doubt as a mental operation, but the lack of vocabulary for doubt may indicate a fairly innocent stage in its development. Biblical men and women were, of course, constantly exercising discernment and sophistication regarding the claims of others. The term for such discernment is *binah* or *ṭʿunah* (תְּבוּנָה or בִּינָה). Exercising *binah* means to distinguish the authentic from the counterfeit; the truthful from the false; the valuable from the worthless. In search of a biblical attitude toward doubt, our minds turn to the Pharaoh of the Exodus. We are told that his heart was hardened, toughened, and stubborn.<sup>3</sup> He is the Exodus story’s example of the kind of rebellious doubt of which it does not approve. A classic, positive portrayal of discernment (*binah*) is the account of King Solomon’s court. Confronted by two women claiming the same baby, he evaluated their ability and inclination to tell the truth. Altering the situation in order to alter their motivations, he discovered which claim to believe and which to doubt (1 Kings 3).

A related example of a biblical character exercising discernment brings us again to the story of Solomon. The Queen of Sheba confessed to King Solomon: “It was a true report that I heard in my own land of your accomplishments, and of your wisdom. However, I did not believe the reports, until I came, and my eyes had seen it” (ולא-הֶאֱמַנְתִּי לְדַבָּרִים, עַד אֶשֶׁר-).<sup>4</sup> בָּאתִי וַתִּרְאֶינָה עֵינַי

.לא-הֶאֱמַנְתִּי לְדַבָּרִים. *Lo he'emanti lad'varim*. To paraphrase: The reports of your wisdom were so wondrous and extraordinary that reports alone could not overcome my doubt. Reports merited further investigation, but only direct experience was sufficient to render such claims truly believable.

Qohelet elevates doubt from the realm of prudence regarding everyday claims to a philosophical stance.

For the fate of human beings and the fate of beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts; for all is vanity. Who knows (*mi yode'a* - מִי יוֹדֵעַ) whether the spirit of a human being goes upward and the spirit of the beast goes down to the earth? (Ecclesiastes 3:19, 21, RSV, modified).

Qohelet’s argument is all doubt. Only what can be observed can be known. “Who knows (*mi yode'a*) if the spirit of a human being rises upwards while that of an animal descends below?” He takes a widely-held folk belief and dismisses it as completely without evidence, or at least, conclusive evidence. A claim for which there is no relevant experience must forever remain in the realms of the unknown. This preference for human experience as a source of knowledge is typical of biblical Wisdom Literature.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> See David Hume, “Of Miracles,” 1748, in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding and Other Writings*, ed. Stephen Buckle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> וַתִּבְּרָה, וַתִּקְשֶׁה, וַתִּקְשָׁק variously throughout the Exodus story (e.g. 7:3, 13, 14).

<sup>4</sup> 1 Kings 10:6-7 (RSV). Further biblical translations, unless otherwise noted, are from the RSV.

<sup>5</sup> “The [Wisdom] authors do not recount revelation given to a particular prophet by a specific deity; in contrast, the teachings of wisdom literature are told in the voice of humans and given as the results of human thought and

### 3. *Henotheism and the Difficulty of Defining Monotheism*

Now, we turn to the issue of Monotheism as an expression of doubt. In a henotheistic form of religion, the worshiper gives exclusive loyalty to one particular deity without explicitly denying the existence of the entities worshiped by others. This form of religion is also called Monolatry.<sup>6</sup> It is widely thought that Israel moved through a stage of Henotheism in a progression from Canaanite polytheism to Monotheism.

In Joshua, chapter 24, the prophet addressed Israel, urging faithfulness to YHWH alone. His language is henotheistic, at least formally. Here he does not dispute the existence of other gods. He demands exclusive service to Israel's God as a matter of loyalty.

Now therefore fear the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the River, and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. And if you be unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell; but as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD. (Joshua 24:14-15).

Entities whom others serve as gods are spoken of as if they exist, but for Israel they must not be objects of worship.

When the emerging Monotheists came to assert that there is “no other god,” what precisely were they asserting?<sup>7</sup> What is it to be a god? If we are to probe the extent of Israel's doubt in the existence of other gods, we must first understand the claim which is the object of doubt.

### 4. *To Be a God*

Our first answer must be circular. To be a “god” is to receive worship as a god. And to worship is to treat an entity as a god. Divine service involved a relatively small number of ritualized behaviours. The presence of these behaviours, or any others intended as worship, signified recognition of a god.

From the satire of idol worship in Isaiah chapter 44, we learn that to be a god is to have power to save, or to be regarded as having such power. This is what the prophet denies to idols carved from wood. Prayers or rituals seeking deliverance, directed at such entities, do not succeed – and that is why they are not truly gods.

observation.” Brennan Breed, “Wisdom Literature,” in *Oxford Biblical Studies Online* (Oxford University Press), accessed 15 December 2015, <http://www.oxfordbiblicalstudies.com/resource/wisdom.xlhtml>

<sup>6</sup> Michiko Yusa, “Henotheism,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: MacMillan, 2005).

<sup>7</sup> Isaiah 45:5, “I am the LORD, and there is no other. Besides me there is no god.” “אֲנִי ה' וְאֵין עוֹד, וְזוֹלָתִי אֵין אֱלֹהִים.”

1 Kings 8:60, “For the LORD is God; there is no other.” “כִּי ה' הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים: אֵין עוֹד.”

Deuteronomy 4:39, “Know this day and consider in your heart that the LORD is God, in the heavens above and on the earth beneath, there is no other.” “יָדַעְתָּ הַיּוֹם, וְהִשְׁבַּתְתָּ אֶל-לַבְבְּךָ, כִּי ה' הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים, בְּשָׁמַיִם מִמַּעַל וְעַל-הָאָרֶץ מִתַּחַת: אֵין עוֹד.”

Who fashions a god or casts an image that is profitable for nothing? ... He cuts down cedars; or he chooses a holm tree or an oak and lets it grow strong among the trees of the forest; he plants a cedar and the rain nourishes it ... Half of it he burns in the fire; over the half he eats flesh, he roasts meat and is satisfied; also he warms himself and says, "Aha, I am warm, I have seen the fire!" And the rest of it he makes into a god, his idol; and falls down to it and worships it; he prays to it and says, "Deliver me, for thou art my god (*hatzileyni, ki eli atah* - הַצִּילֵנִי, כִּי אֱלֹהֵי אֲתָהּ)!" ... No one considers, nor is there knowledge or discernment (*velo da'at velo t'vunah* - וְלֹא דַעַת וְלֹא תְבוּנָה) to say, "Half of it I burned in the fire, I also baked bread on its coals, I roasted flesh and have eaten; and shall I make the residue of it an abomination? Shall I fall down before a block of wood?" (Isaiah 44:10, 14, 16, 17, 19).

The phrase, *hatzileyni, ki eli atah* (הַצִּילֵנִי, כִּי אֱלֹהֵי אֲתָהּ) is the key. To be a god is to have the power (and potentially the disposition) to deliver the worshiper.

In Judges, chapter 10, again we see that the essence of service to a god is the expectation of deliverance.

And the LORD said to the people of Israel ... You have forsaken me and served other gods; therefore I will deliver you no more ... Go and cry to the gods whom you have chosen; let them deliver you in the time of your distress" (Judges 10:11, 14).

A god must not only have power, it must be responsive to human entreaties. That is why biblical satire of idolatry focuses on the unresponsiveness of idols to human appeals.<sup>8</sup> Psalm 115 is most elegant in this regard, if contempt can be elegant:

Their idols are silver and gold, the work of men's hands. They have mouths, but do not speak; eyes, but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell. They have hands, but do not feel; feet, but do not walk; and they do not make a sound in their throat. Those who make them are like them; so are all who trust in them (Psalm 115:4-8).

Biblical Monotheism denies, in some cases, that the gods of the pagans exist at all. Those that exist, do not exist *as* gods. This fine distinction makes the margin between Henotheism and Monotheism quite narrow. Israel never ceased to believe in the existence of a variety of superhuman entities which they did not worship – such as angels, and such as the heavenly bodies. Such entities do not cease to exist simply because others treat them as gods.

The opening chapter of Genesis recognizes that the Sun has power and that it dominates the day; and that the Moon has power and that it dominates the night. However, biblical imagination denies that that the Sun and Moon have independent personality and will. Invocation of them does not produce any effect. If one wishes to affect the operations of Sun and Moon, one must invoke Israel's God. Therefore, for Israelites, Sun and Moon were not divinities.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Deuteronomy 4:28, "the work of men's hands, wood and stone, which neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell."

<sup>9</sup> That other cultures worshipped the Sun or Moon is well known. See: Jenny Hill, "Ra," *Ancient Egypt Online*, accessed 15 December 2015, <http://www.ancientegyptonline.co.uk/ra.html>

Adam Stone, "Nanna/Suen/Sin (god)," *Ancient Mesopotamian Gods and Goddesses*, Oracc and the UK Higher Education Academy, accessed 15 December 2015, <http://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/amgg/listofdeities/nannasuen>

Although it so happens that the cosmology of the Bible asserts that Israel's God is the Creator, as a matter of semantics, it is not necessary to be the creator in order to be a god, and it is not even necessary to be a god in order to be a creator – that is, to be the cause of the physical world in its current form, or part of it. That which has saving power or is regarded as having such power, which can be invoked as gods are normally invoked by offerings of food, wine, meat, grain, milk, dance, first-born babies, sex, incense or prayer – such entities are referred to as gods in the way that language is used in the Hebrew Bible.

### 5. *To Doubt All Gods but One*

As a biblical expression of “pure Monotheism,” we might cite Deuteronomy chapter 4 which has been taken up in the Alcinu prayer – “YHWH is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath. There is no other.”

כִּי ה' הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים,  
בְּשִׁמְיָם מִמַּעַל וְעַל-הָאָרֶץ מִתַּחַת: אֵין עוֹד.

“There is no other” does not mean that no other entities exist at all. Some modern Jewish interpreters do read Deuteronomy 4 in that sense, as an expression of Pantheism or Panentheism,<sup>10</sup> but it does not seem likely that biblical writers held that view. Entities other than God existed for the emerging Monotheists, certainly, but they were not divine beings. Even if people should offer them food, wine, meat, grain, milk, dance, first-born babies, orgies, incense or prayer, contrary to the commandments, there would be no benefit because those other entities did not have invocable power. The only effect likely to result would be a negative response from Israel's God, for betrayal of the covenant.

Therefore, if pure Monotheism means non-belief in all superhuman entities besides Israel's God – I conclude that Monotheism was never reached in the Bible or classical Judaism. As it emerged in the history of Israel, Monotheism was not an ontological theory or a philosophical position. There is no discussion within the Bible of the necessity of an Uncaused Cause or any such philosophical argument for a single Supreme Being. Biblical Monotheism was a denial of the legitimacy, even the existence, of all religious competitors to Israel's patron deity.

Post-exilic Israel *did* reach the stage where their doubts in the efficacy of idols completely overwhelmed any lingering belief. Trust in idols was ultimately seen as wicked, foolish, and silly. For centuries idols and heavenly bodies had appealed, vividly, to Israelites as objects of worship, but eventually the appeal was gone, and they became objects of ridicule and satire.

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<sup>10</sup> Bradley Shavit Artson, “Holy, Holy, Holy! Jewish Affirmations of Panentheism,” in *Panentheism Across the World's Traditions*, ed. Lorilial Biernacki and Philip Clayton (London: Oxford University Press, 2013).

### 6. *Doubt Affirmed by Satire but with a Boomerang Effect*

In a powerful dramatic scene full of theatrical tension and special effects, Elijah is portrayed challenging the worshippers of Ba'al to a demonstration of divine power.

Let two bulls be given to us; and let them choose one bull for themselves, and cut it in pieces and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it; and I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood, and put no fire to it. And you call on the name of your god and I will call on the name of the LORD; and the God who answers by fire, he is God (1 Kings 18:23-24).

The legitimacy of Ba'al or YHWH as God is at stake, and the test is agreed upon: The god who answers by fire is truly God.

The satire includes the pathetic antics of the hundreds of priests of Ba'al, who dance and gash themselves for hours with no result. The irony is sharpened by the mocking comments of Elijah to Ba'al's priests: "Shout louder! After all, he is a god! But he may be in conversation, he may be relieving himself, or he may be on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and will wake up!" (1 Kings 18:27, RSV, modified).

The comical portrayal of Ba'al's priests is followed by Elijah's simple, brief, and humble prayer. Fire immediately descends from heaven and consumes his water-drenched sacrifice. As it transpires on the stage, or in the imagination, the demonstration could not be more successful in favour of YHWH.

The satire in the tale of Elijah is powerful, for the reader knows that nothing will happen in response to the desperate cries of Baal's prophets. Nothing ever did (but, see below). Yet, the worshippers of Israel's God must also be aware that their own cries for help often go unanswered. Fire never really falls from heaven. The same insight that caused Abraham to smash the idols in his father's shop also shakes the altar erected by Elijah.<sup>11</sup>

Doubt, once unleashed, is not easily contained. The logic of Elijah's demonstration has a boomerang effect. The premise of the demonstration is that the existence or value of a divinity can be measured by its responsiveness to prayer and sacrifice. Ahab and Jezebel's god is exposed as inadequate, in real life as in the drama. Now, Elijah's God must be evaluated by the same criteria.

When I said that nothing ever happened in response to prayers to Ba'al – I overstated the case. A teaching of Rabbi Akiva corrects my overstatement.

א"ל זונין לר"ע, לבי ולבך ידע דעבודת כוכבים לית בה מששא, והא קחזינן גברי דאזלי כי מתברי ואתו כי מצמדי. מ"ט? אמר לו... יסורין בשעה שמשגרין אותן על האדם משביעין אותן שלא תלכו אלא ביום פלוני, ולא תצאו אלא ביום פלוני, ובשעה פלונית, ועל ידי פלוני, ועל ידי סם פלוני. כיון שהגיע זמן לצאת, הלך זה לבית עבודת כוכבים. אמרו יסורין, דין הוא שלא נצא, וחזרין ואומרים, וכי מפני ששטתה זה עושה שלא כהוגן, אנו נאבד שבועתנו?  
Zunin said to Rabbi Akiva: "We both know in our heart that there is no reality in an idol; nevertheless we see men enter the idol's shrine crippled and come out cured. What is the reason?" He replied: "At the time afflictions are sent upon a man the oath is imposed upon them, 'You shall not come upon him except on such and such a day, nor depart from him

<sup>11</sup> Genesis Rabbah 38:13. This is the famous story of boy Abraham who, tending his father's idol shop, becomes disgusted and smashes the merchandise.

except on such and such a day, and at such an hour, and through the medium of so and so, and through such and such a remedy.' When the time arrives for them to depart, the man chanced to go to an idolatrous shrine. The afflictions plead, 'It is right that we should not leave him and depart; but because this fool acts in an unworthy way shall we break our oath?!'<sup>12</sup>

In other words, if an illness was destined to go into remission and a person prayed to the idol for healing at that time, the prayer and the healing would coincide. The devotee would mistakenly confuse coincidence for causation, and faith in the idol would be affirmed. Intermittent reinforcement being stronger, psychologically, than totally consistent reinforcement,<sup>13</sup> an occasional answered prayer will do even more to perpetuate devotion to a god than consistently answered prayers.

When the Elijah story is finished and the readers / listeners return to daily life, they know that the portrayal of Elijah's God starkly contrasts with their own experience. The storyteller framed his dramatic demonstration too well. Israel's God also offers, at best, intermittent reinforcement. The doubt which the ancient readers / listeners habitually applied to the pagan idols must by the same logic attach itself to YHWH. They may not acknowledge it to themselves, but habits of mind are persistent and this one will incubate in sensitive minds for 3,000 years.

### *7. Doubt as a Habit of Mind*

It was inevitable that Israel's preference for doubt should eventually be directed toward the last remaining God. Scepticism is a natural part of the Jewish experience. Different majority religions would wax and wane. The Jewish mind would doubt and question them all, and that doubt would define the Jews' place in the larger society. In the middle ages Jews were non-believers and dissenters as far as the dominant religions were concerned. With the advent of modernity, those sceptical habits of mind could be applied to religion generally, including Judaism itself. The results were volatile – and still are.

Modern achievements of Jews in the sciences and fields of critical inquiry are deeply rooted, culturally. Not acquiescing in what everybody knows – in any body of knowledge – is a Jewish habit of mind. (At least, I would like to think so.) Why are many modern Jews, devoted to the heritage of Israel, Sceptics and even Atheists? This is the way of Abraham our father – to doubt and deny, not in a negative and sterile fashion, but in order to clear the ground for the construction of more adequate models of reality.

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<sup>12</sup> b. Avodah Zarah 55a. Soncino translation, modified.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Jennifer T. Freeland and George H. Noell, "Programming for Maintenance: An Investigation of Delayed Intermittent Reinforcement and Common Stimuli to Create Indiscriminable Contingencies," *Journal of Behavioral Education* 11 (2002): 5-18.

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