An Academic Examination of Post-Mosaic Jewish Deviation from Absolute Monotheism: A Critical Historical, Philological, and Theological Analysis Based on Non-Islamic Sources

Jewish Monotheism Analysis

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Concise Overview of Post-Mosaic Jewish Monotheistic Deviation

This study analyses the historical development of post-Mosaic Jewish deviation from the Torah-defined ideal of absolute monotheism, highlighting how Israelite worship repeatedly incorporated Canaanite, Mesopotamian, and Egyptian elements. Archaeological and textual evidence—including the veneration of Baal and Asherah, household idols, high places, and inscriptions such as "Yahweh and his Asherah"—shows that syncretism was widespread and often institutionalised.

The Hebrew Bible itself depicts certain kings and figures classified in the Jewish canon as prophets as promoting or tolerating idolatry, a portrayal Islam rejects, since from an Islamic standpoint no true prophet could endorse polytheism. Nevertheless, the study documents these internal Jewish claims to demonstrate the extent of deviation recorded within Jewish sources.

The research further examines Second Temple developments—angelic intermediaries, mystical ascent literature, and exalted figures such as Metatron—which complicated Jewish monotheism and provoked rabbinic condemnation of "two powers in heaven." The rise of early Jewish Christians who attributed divinity to Jesus is also noted as a significant deviation emerging from within the Jewish milieu.

While academically documenting these developments, the study emphasises that Islam does not endorse the divine name "YHWH," recognising only the names revealed in the Qur'an. Overall, the analysis shows that absolute monotheism in Judaism emerged gradually through repeated cycles of deviation and reform rather than as an uninterrupted inheritance from Moses.

Part I: Introduction, Scope, Methodology, and Framework

Introduction

Research Question. This study examines the extent to which post-Mosaic Jewish religion deviated from the Torah's ideal of absolute monotheism. The central question asks: How and why did the religion of Israel, after the time of Moses, depart from the Torah-defined concept of absolute monotheism in various historical contexts up through Late Antiquity?

In Jewish tradition, Mosaic revelation established a strict monotheistic creed, epitomized by the Shema: "Hear O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone"

(Deuteronomy 6:4), and the Decalogue's first commands, "You shall have no other gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself an idol" (Exodus 20:3–4). Torah-based absolute monotheism is herein defined as the exclusive worship of one, singular deity (YHWH, the God of Israel), with no allowance for other gods, intermediary divine agents, syncretistic practices, or the elevation of any human to divine status.

In essence, this monotheism demands that only YHWH is God; all other purported deities are false or non-existent; and it forbids any worship of or allegiance to any being apart from YHWH. The Torah's legislation repeatedly emphasizes that Israel must "not follow other gods, any of the gods of the surrounding peoples" (Deuteronomy 6:14) and must reject idols, foreign cults, and divination as abominations (Deuteronomy 18:9–14).

This absolute monotheistic ideal entails: one sole God of the universe; no idol or image of God; no divine consort or offspring; no intermediary beings to receive cultic devotion; and no mortal to be venerated as part of the Godhead. Any deviation from these principles – whether through idol worship, theological syncretism, angelic intermediaries, or attribution of divinity to a human – represents a breach of the Mosaic monotheistic norm as understood in the Hebrew Bible.

Background and Significance. The question of Israel's fidelity to monotheism has long been a subject of scholarly scrutiny in Jewish Studies and biblical history. Judaism is classically regarded as the paradigmatic monotheistic faith, often contrasted with the polytheistic cultures of the ancient Near East. However, a close historical and textual examination reveals that the practical reality of Israelite and Jewish religious life did not always live up to the strict monotheistic ideal. From the incident of the Golden Calf soon after the Sinai covenant (Exodus 32) to the idolatries condemned by later prophets, the Hebrew Bible itself documents recurring lapses where Israelites "replaced [God's] position with idols," serving other gods alongside YHWH (Kim, 2023, p. 4).

Scholars now widely recognize that ancient Israelite religion evolved out of a West Semitic cultural milieu that was originally polytheistic or henotheistic. Early Israelite belief appears to have included a pantheon or divine family structure similar to that of Canaan, with Yahweh initially one deity among others (Smith, 2001). For example, Ugaritic texts show the god El and his consort Asherah heading a council of deities, and Mark S. Smith (2001) argues that Israel's early religion "outrightly rejects views of an early belief in a single deity" in favor of this model – positing that Yahweh was originally a second-tier deity (a storm-god) who later merged with El and rose to sole supremacy (Smith, 2001, pp. 176–182).

In this view, biblical monotheism emerged only gradually, reaching full expression in the national theology during the exilic or post-exilic period (7th–5th centuries BCE), when prophets and reformers aggressively promoted the exclusive reality of YHWH (Smith, 2001, pp. 187–193). Prior to that, even devout Yahwists may have acknowledged the existence of other gods (for other nations) and were primarily concerned with exclusive worship of YHWH (monolatry) rather than a philosophical denial of all other divinities (Hess, 2002, p. 187). This scholarly perspective stands in contrast to earlier traditional and apologetic claims that ancient Israel was consistently monotheistic from the Mosaic age onward.

Understanding the historical deviations from absolute monotheism is significant for several reasons. First, it provides insight into the development of Jewish theology and religious identity. The shifts and struggles over exclusive worship helped shape the trajectory of Judaism; for example, the prophetic movement's crusade against idolatry and syncretism in the biblical period laid the groundwork for the uncompromising monotheism of later Judaism. Second, this inquiry helps contextualize Judaism within the broader religious environment of the ancient Near East and Greco-Roman world. Far from existing in isolation, Israelite religion interacted with surrounding cultures; examining deviations such as the veneration of Canaanite gods or Hellenistic religious syncretism highlights how Judaism responded to external influences and internal social pressures.

Third, this investigation has implications for comparative religion and our understanding of monotheism as a concept. It challenges any overly static or idealized portrayal of Judaism by illuminating the dynamic historical reality – a reality in which Jewish communities at times incorporated foreign elements or heterodox ideas before orthodox boundaries were firmly reasserted. Finally, this study addresses an apologetical concern: traditional Jewish apologetics often maintain that any apparent deviations were either minor aberrations or misunderstood representations of monotheism. By critically analyzing these claims through academic evidence, the study aims to distinguish between ideological ideal and historical actuality. In doing so, it contributes a more nuanced, academically grounded foundation for Jewish Studies, demonstrating that the strength of Jewish monotheism was forged in part through its confrontations with deviation and syncretism.

Literature Context. In the academic study of ancient Israel and Second Temple Judaism, there has been robust debate on the timeline and purity of Israel's monotheistic faith. Early 20th-century scholars like Yehezkel Kaufmann took a strongly exceptionalist position, arguing that Israel's religion was sui generis and monotheistic from the very beginning. Kaufmann (1960), for example, claimed that the Israelite "revolution" of faith occurred with Moses and that "the monotheistic idea was… born in Israel's initial period," permeating the nation's spirit from the start

(Kaufmann, 1960, pp. 456–459). He asserted that Israel never truly succumbed to paganism; even when Israelites worshipped idols, they did not conceive of those idols as independent gods in the full sense but as misguided modes of worshipping YHWH or minor supernatural forces (Kaufmann, 1960, pp. 232–234).

In essence, this apologetic view holds that Israel's core theology "never deviated" from monotheism (Kaufmann, 1960) and that idolatries were external corruptions rather than an evolution of Israel's own belief system. Kaufmann's stance, reflecting a form of traditional apologetics, defended the purity and antiquity of Mosaic monotheism against critical scholars who saw Israelite religion as evolving. However, more recent scholarship has largely moved away from this idealized model. Archaeological discoveries and critical textual analysis have exposed clear evidence that many Israelites and Jews in various periods did deviate from the strict monotheistic creed in practice—and sometimes even in semi-official theology.

For instance, inscriptions from 8th-century BCE Israel unearthed at Kuntillet 'Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom famously invoke "Yahweh and his Asherah," suggesting that in popular religion Yahweh was at times viewed as having a divine consort (Dever, 2005, pp. 159–163). Such evidence directly contradicts the notion that no Israelites ever acknowledged other deities. Likewise, as noted by Mark S. Smith and others, earlier biblical texts contain remnants of a divine council worldview (e.g., Psalm 82 or Deuteronomy 32:8–9), wherein YHWH is envisioned presiding over other lesser divine beings (Smith, 2001, pp. 47–53). These findings support the view that Israel's pure monotheism was a hard-won achievement of history rather than an unbroken inheritance from Sinai.

This study builds on the current consensus that ancient Israelite and Jewish faith underwent significant tensions and transformations with regard to monotheism. By focusing on specific historical manifestations of "deviation" – and grounding the analysis in rigorous historical, philological, and theological scholarship – the aim is to provide an academically irrefutable foundation for understanding how Judaism ultimately solidified its absolute monotheistic theology.

In summary, Part I lays the groundwork by clarifying what Torah-defined absolute monotheism entails and why investigating deviations from it is important. The research question and significance are established against the backdrop of prior scholarship, ranging from traditional apologetic claims of unwavering Jewish monotheism to modern critical evidence of historical divergence. This provides a clean, well-structured foundation for the detailed analysis to follow. The subsequent sections of Part I will outline the scope of the study (time frame and materials), describe the methodological approach and sources, and present the analytical

framework – including the categories of deviation that will be examined – thus setting the stage for the rest of this academic investigation.

Scope of the Study

This inquiry is delimited to the period from Moses through Late Antiquity. "Post-Mosaic" is defined as beginning after the formative Mosaic era (i.e., after the covenant at Sinai and the delivery of the Torah) and extending through the Second Temple period into the early Rabbinic age. In practice, the study covers roughly 1200 BCE to 600 CE. The starting point is the biblical epoch immediately following Moses' leadership; for example, the Israelite settlement in Canaan (Iron Age) and the era of the Judges and Kings, when the religion of YHWH encountered Canaanite and other influences. The narrative of the Hebrew Bible (Tanakh) provides many primary instances of deviation in this timeframe, from the idolatry in the wilderness (Exodus 32) to the Baal and Asherah worship during the monarchy (1 Kings 18:18–21).

The scope then includes the exilic and Second Temple periods (6th century BCE through 1st century CE), during which Judaism interacted with empires and cultures such as Babylonian, Persian, Greek, and Roman. This era saw new challenges to monotheism: syncretistic practices by some Jews, the allure of Hellenistic religions, and internal sectarian differences in theology. We consider evidence from Judean communities both in the Land of Israel and the Diaspora.

Notably, the study encompasses Jewish communities in Elephantine (Egypt) and elsewhere, whose religious practices (5th century BCE) shed light on divergence in a diaspora context. It also covers the emergence of Jewish sects in the late Second Temple period (such as the Hellenizers, Sadducees, Pharisees, Qumran sectarians, etc.) and how their beliefs may have differed in conceptions of the divine.

Late Antiquity in our scope refers to the early centuries of the Common Era (1st–5th centuries CE), overlapping with the formative Rabbinic period. This includes phenomena like early Jewish-Christian groups in the 1st century (e.g., Nazarenes or Ebionites), who attributed a divine or semi-divine status to Jesus of Nazareth – a development seen as radical deviation by other Jews. It also includes Gnostic or mystical trends in the 2nd–3rd centuries, and the rabbinic responses to them. The cut-off point of the study is around the close of Late Antiquity (approximately the 5th to 6th century CE), by which time the Talmudic rabbis had largely consolidated normative Jewish theology and firmly denounced heterodox beliefs (such as "two powers in heaven" teachings) as heretical.

Within this time frame, the study's subject matter is focused on religious beliefs and practices related to monotheism. Key sources include the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament (especially its historical and prophetic books), Second Temple literature (such as the Apocrypha, Pseudepigrapha, Dead Sea Scrolls), contemporary historical accounts (e.g., Josephus), inscriptions and papyri (e.g., the Elephantine papyri, archaeological inscriptions like those at Kuntillet 'Ajrud), and rabbinic literature (Mishnah, Talmud, midrashim) for Late Antiquity perspectives. By examining this broad corpus, we trace how the concept of God's oneness was upheld, challenged, or reinterpreted in different contexts.

It is important to clarify that absolute monotheism here is measured against the Torah's standards, not against later philosophical or medieval theological definitions. In other words, the question is not whether ancient Jews conceived of God in abstract philosophical terms, but whether they worshipped or acknowledged any other being in a way that violates the Torah's demands for exclusive loyalty to YHWH. Therefore, deviation will be identified in practical and doctrinal terms relevant to the biblical commandments (e.g., worship of idols, making sacrifices to other gods, attributing godhood to a person, etc.).

Minor intra-Jewish theological variations that do not infringe monotheistic worship (such as debates on God's form or attributes) are generally outside the scope unless they clearly lead to a breach of the exclusivity of God. For instance, questions of anthropomorphism in the Bible (e.g., describing God in human terms) are not "deviations" per se, whereas the worship of a figure like a king or angel as divine would be. The geographical scope predominantly covers the areas where Israelites/Jews lived: the Levant (Israel/Judah), with some attention to diaspora communities in regions like Egypt (Elephantine), Mesopotamia (exilic communities), and the Greco-Roman world (e.g., Asia Minor, Rome if pertinent). This allows us to see how different environments may have influenced the tendency to deviate or to reinforce monotheism.

Finally, in defining the scope, it is necessary to distinguish clearly between the historical-critical investigation and the later theological evaluation. Parts II through VIII are strictly confined to pre-Islamic Judaism and rely exclusively on non-Islamic sources, including Jewish texts, archaeology, and Jewish, Christian, and secular academic scholarship. By contrast, Part XI is intentionally devoted to an explicit Sunni Islamic theological evaluation of Jewish belief and practice from the advent of Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century CE up to the present. This structural separation preserves the integrity of the historical analysis while allowing for a controlled and methodologically transparent Islamic assessment in a later chapter. In this way, the core historical findings are established independently before being examined through a distinct Islamic theological lens.

Methodology

Sources and Data

The research methodology is interdisciplinary, drawing on historical, philological, and theological analysis of both primary and secondary sources. A wide range of primary sources undergirds the investigation. The Hebrew Bible is a central primary source: its legal passages (especially in Torah/Pentateuch and Deuteronomistic code) articulate the monotheistic ideal, and its narrative and prophetic books provide accounts of deviations (for example, the Book of Judges and Kings recount cycles of idolatry; prophetic oracles in Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah, etc., chastise Israel for syncretism). We read these texts in their historical context using the tools of modern biblical scholarship (textual criticism, historical-critical method) to understand what kinds of practices or beliefs the texts are referencing.

Additionally, Second Temple Jewish texts are used, such as the Deuterocanonical books (e.g., 1–2 Maccabees, which describe Hellenistic pressures on Jewish worship), the Dead Sea Scrolls (some of which shed light on angelology and exalted figures in the Qumran community), and Jewish Hellenistic writings like those of Philo of Alexandria and Josephus (which offer perspective on Jewish beliefs in a Greco-Roman milieu).

Inscriptions and papyrus archives provide an archaeological-textual dataset: notably, the Elephantine Papyri (5th century BCE), which record the religious life of a Judean mercenary community in Egypt, including pledges to multiple deities (YHW and Anat-Bethel) (van der Toorn, 2016, p. 668). Epigraphic finds such as the blessings "by YHWH of Samaria and by his Asherah" inscribed on pottery (Kuntillet ʿAjrud, c. 8th century BCE) are critical data points for detecting folk religious practices (Dever, 2005, pp. 159–161). Likewise, material culture – altars, figurines, cultic objects – discovered in Israelite contexts informs our understanding of syncretistic worship.

For the Late Antique period, rabbinic literature (Mishnah, Talmud, Tosefta, midrash) is an invaluable primary corpus: although compiled after the fact, these texts preserve rabbinic memories of heresies and deviant sects (e.g., references to minim, often identified as Judeo-Christians or Gnostics, and condemnations of "two powers in heaven" beliefs in Talmudic discussions). Where needed, early Christian writings are also consulted as primary evidence, particularly for understanding the claims of Jewish Christians (the New Testament, for instance, though a Christian text, records Jewish followers of Jesus praying to him, which we analyze historically rather than doctrinally).

In addition to primary sources, a robust selection of secondary scholarly sources is employed. These include modern academic studies in the fields of Bible, ancient Near Eastern religion, Second Temple Judaism, and Rabbinics. Important works guiding this study's perspective are, for example: Mark S. Smith's *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism* (2001) and *The Early History of God* (2002), which use Ugaritic comparisons and biblical exegesis to chart Israel's religious evolution; William G. Dever's archaeological study *Did God Have a Wife?* (2005), which explores folk religion and the Asherah evidence; Karel van der Toorn's articles on Elephantine, illuminating how Judeans there "paid their respects to four distinct deities" beside YHWH (van der Toorn, 2016, p. 668); and Alan F. Segal's classic work *Two Powers in Heaven* (1977), which examines the rabbinic reports of early heresies involving multiple divine figures. These scholarly sources are all from non-Islamic academic contexts (Jewish Studies, Biblical Studies, History of Religion).

Crucially, the empirical historical analysis in this study (Parts II through VIII) draws only on non-Islamic materials, including Jewish, Christian, and secular academic scholarship, as well as primary Jewish texts and archaeological data. This methodological choice deliberately brackets Islamic revelation and theology so that the reconstruction of post-Mosaic Jewish history rests on sources commonly accepted within mainstream academic discourse. Islamic perspectives are therefore not used as evidentiary foundations in the historical chapters. Instead, they are reserved exclusively for Part XI, which is explicitly framed as a Sunni Islamic theological evaluation of the historical findings established earlier in the study. In this way, the analytical and theological dimensions of the research are carefully distinguished and methodologically controlled.

Analytical Approach

The methodology is fundamentally historical-critical. This means we approach each instance of alleged deviation with attention to historical context and development. For example, when examining idol worship in the monarchic period, we ask: what socio-political factors (e.g., Canaanite influence, pressures on Israel/Judah) contributed to this syncretism? What do contemporary records or archaeology reveal that the biblical writers (who often condemn the practice) might not state explicitly?

We also utilize philological analysis: key terms (like *elohim* for gods, *asherah*, *teraphim*, etc.) are analyzed in the original languages and across texts to discern their exact meaning and implications. If a biblical text says the Israelites "served the Baals and the Ashtoreth" (Judges 2:11–13), philological and comparative analysis can identify Baal and Astarte/Ashtoret as specific foreign deities, indicating outright polytheistic worship rather than a metaphor. Similarly, if a Dead Sea Scroll text or apocalyptic writing speaks of a principal angel or "Son of Man" figure receiving homage, we

scrutinize whether that constitutes treating the figure as divine or as an agent of the one God.

A key aspect of our approach is categorization of deviations (explained in detail in the next section). By classifying the types of deviations (idol worship, intermediary veneration, human deification, etc.), we can analyze each category with appropriate methods. For instance, idol worship and syncretism are often best illuminated by archaeology and socio-historical analysis, because they involve popular practice and external influences. In contrast, the veneration of intermediary figures (like angels or personified divine attributes) may require more theological-philological analysis, since it can be subtle and embedded in texts (e.g., are angels ever prayed to, or is wisdom personified as a quasi-divine figure in some Jewish texts?).

The elevation of humans (like emperors or messianic figures) might involve studying historical accounts of certain sects or communities (e.g., how did some Hellenistic Jews view Alexander or the Seleucid king's divinity claims? What about the early Christians with Jesus?). Throughout the analysis, a critical eye is kept on biases and later interpretations. The Hebrew Bible, for example, often presents the view of Deuteronomistic or prophetic authors who were staunchly monotheistic; their accounts of idolatry come with theological commentary (usually condemnation). We thus attempt to read "between the lines" historically: the very vehemence of the prophets against Baal worship implies that such worship was widespread and tempting to Israel, not merely a one-off aberration.

We corroborate the biblical testimony with external evidence when available. Similarly, rabbinic texts discussing heresies are polemical; the rabbis had a vested interest in defining orthodoxy by denouncing deviations. We use those texts to identify what sorts of beliefs existed, but also cross-check with any other sources (for example, comparing rabbinic references to "two powers" believers with early Christian or gnostic writings that might reflect such belief, to ensure we accurately understand the heresy in question).

Finally, the methodology includes a component of critical evaluation of apologetics. Where traditional or confessional explanations have been offered to reconcile apparent deviations with monotheism, we will evaluate those explanations against the evidence. For example, some traditional commentators argue that when Israelites worshipped the Golden Calf, they intended it as merely a pedestal or symbol for YHWH, not as a separate god – an apologetic attempt to soften the lapse. We will assess whether such claims are supported by the text (in this case, Exodus 32 portrays it plainly as "gods… who brought you up from Egypt," suggesting a relapse into pagan conceptualization).

In another instance, some modern orthodox apologists interpret the inscriptions "Yahweh and his Asherah" to mean an object (a sacred tree or pole dedicated to YHWH) rather than a goddess consort, thereby denying that Jews recognized a goddess; we will consider the scholarly analyses (e.g., Dever, 2005) that weigh the grammar and archaeological context, which tend to conclude that Asherah in these inscriptions was understood as a deity (a goddess) alongside Yahweh, reflecting genuine syncretism (Dever, 2005, pp. 150–152).

In each case, the goal is not to attack religious sensibilities but to uphold historical truth: if the weight of evidence indicates that a deviation occurred, then explaining it away due to theological discomfort does not hold in academic inquiry. Thus, apologetic arguments are subjected to the same evidentiary standards – and only academic sources or analyses will be cited in either supporting or refuting those arguments.

In summary, the methodology combines comprehensive source analysis with a clear evaluative framework. It uses primary sources from the era in question, interpreted with up-to-date scholarship, and applies a consistent criterion for what constitutes a deviation from Torah monotheism. By structuring the approach in this way, we ensure the conclusions drawn are well-supported by evidence and that alternative explanations (including traditional ones) are fairly considered yet critically weighed. The result will be an evidence-based, nuanced understanding of Jewish religious history, providing a solid foundation for the chapters that follow.

Analytical Framework: Defining "Deviation" Categories

To systematically investigate post-Mosaic deviations from absolute monotheism, this study employs an analytical framework that categorizes deviations into three broad types. These categories encapsulate the main ways in which the Torah's monotheistic standard could be compromised. Defining and differentiating these forms of deviation is crucial for organizing the historical evidence and scholarly discussion in a coherent manner. The categories are as follows.

1. **Idolatry and Syncretism.** This refers to the worship of other gods or images, or the blending of Yahwistic faith with elements of foreign religions. It is the most overt form of deviation: sacrificing to Baal or Ashtoreth, erecting idols or high places, incorporating Canaanite, Egyptian, or Mesopotamian deity cults into Israelite practice, etc. The Hebrew Bible provides extensive testimony of such practices among Israelites, despite the prohibition ("you shall tear down their altars, smash their pillars, and cut down their Asherim" – Exodus 34:13). Historical examples include the worship of the Canaanite fertility gods Baal and

Asherah during the period of the Judges and monarchy (Judges 2:11–13; 1 Kings 18:19).

Archaeological evidence reinforces this: hundreds of terracotta figurines (likely representing goddesses, possibly Asherah) have been found in Iron Age Israelite sites, and inscriptions explicitly mention "Yahweh and his Asherah," indicating Israelites at times "compromised by mixing the pure worship of Yahweh with that of a 'queen-goddess'" (Schmidt, 2002, p. 110). Syncretism could also take subtler forms, like adopting foreign religious rituals (e.g., burning incense to the Queen of Heaven as some Judeans did; see Jeremiah 7:18). In all these cases, the common thread is a breach of exclusive loyalty: YHWH is no longer worshipped alone.

The study will document instances of idolatry and syncretism from the biblical period (e.g., Solomon's toleration of his wives' gods, the establishment of calf shrines by Jeroboam), through the Hellenistic era (e.g., some Jews participating in Greek cults or the extreme case of forced pagan sacrifices under Antiochus IV), up to Late Antiquity (though after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE, outright idolatry among Jews became far less common, the category still includes any later folk practices or magical syncretism that might appear).

We will analyze not only the occurrences but also the responses: prophets like Elijah, Hosea, and Jeremiah vehemently opposed Israel's syncretism, and later, movements like the Maccabean revolt were catalyzed by outrage against enforced idolatry. By studying this category, we understand how strongly the norm of monotheism had to be asserted against persistent tendencies toward polytheistic practice among the people.

2. **Divine Intermediaries and Subordinate Powers.** This category covers deviations in which intermediary beings – angels, hypostases, personified attributes, or minor divine figures – are accorded religious reverence or semi-divine status. Unlike outright idolatry, these beliefs may not reject YHWH; rather, they insert additional figures into the heavenly hierarchy in a way that dilutes absolute monotheism. The Torah ideal, as interpreted in later Judaism, left little room for worship of or prayer to any being except God Himself. Yet Second Temple Jewish literature is replete with powerful angelic and semi-divine figures.

For example, texts like 1 Enoch and Jubilees elaborate angelologies that sometimes border on giving angels independent roles in judgment or mediation. A notable example is the figure of Metatron, who appears in later mystical and apocalyptic works (e.g., 3 Enoch). Metatron is explicitly called "the lesser YHWH" in some texts – an astonishing appellation that implies a "junior deity" or divine deputy alongside

God (Scholem, 1960, p. 43). The rise of such concepts led the rabbinic sages to identify and condemn the "two powers in heaven" heresy (Segal, 1977, pp. 1–5).

Some Second Temple Jewish texts exhibit a developing celestial bureaucracy featuring ranked angelic beings responsible for mediation, revelation, and even divine judgment. This hierarchical structure, reflected in Jubilees and certain Qumran hymns, illustrates a theological environment where intermediary veneration became normalized, complicating strict adherence to Deuteronomy's prohibition against consulting heavenly beings.

Alan Segal's research shows that only in the 2nd century CE did rabbinic Judaism officially label it heretical to posit two divine powers, suggesting that prior to that, certain streams of Jewish thought (possibly some sectarian, apocalyptic, or Hellenistic-influenced groups) did flirt with a binitarian or dualistic understanding of the Godhead (Segal, 1977, pp. 60–62). Examples of intermediary elevation include the veneration of angels (praying to angels or seeking angels as mediators), which some Jews evidently practiced – hence warnings in later texts not to say certain prayers to Michael or others (see Colossians 2:18 for a Christian critique of "worship of angels" happening in some circles).

Another example is the personified Wisdom (Chokhmah/Sophia) in Jewish wisdom literature, who is sometimes depicted in almost divine terms (as in Proverbs 8 or the Wisdom of Solomon). Though usually not worshiped, this concept blurs strict monotheism by introducing a quasi-independent divine attribute.

By investigating this category, we will consider how Jews grappled with the existence of a spiritual hierarchy (angels, etc.) while officially maintaining that only God is to be worshipped. Did popular piety or speculative theology ever cross the line into actually praying to or invoking these intermediaries? The Qumran community, for instance, in the *Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice*, describes heavenly liturgy involving angelic priests – raising questions about whether they were ascribing to angels roles in worship that might infringe on God's uniqueness.

We will analyze relevant texts and scholarly interpretations to determine when reverence for intermediaries became a deviation rather than acceptable veneration. Rabbinic reactions (e.g., the story of Aher – Elisha ben Abuyah – who allegedly saw Metatron enthroned and concluded there are two authorities in heaven, leading to his apostasy) will be used to illustrate the boundaries drawn by normative Judaism in Late Antiquity (Segal, 1977, pp. 67–72).

3. **Human Deification (Elevation of Humans to Divine Status).** The third category involves cases where a human being is elevated to a god-like status or worshipped, which the Torah unequivocally forbids ("Do not make a covenant with them or with their gods… you shall not bow down to their gods or serve them," Exodus 23:32–33, also implying no mortal should be accorded divine worship). In ancient Near Eastern cultures, it was common to deify kings or see the emperor as a god. Did any Jews accept such practices?

The general answer is that mainstream Judaism strongly resisted human deification; this was a hallmark differentiating Israel from, for example, the Roman imperial cult. However, there are notable instances to examine. One is the case of Hellenistic ruler worship: in the 2nd century BCE, the Seleucid king Antiochus IV Epiphanes attempted to impose a cult (including possibly a statue of himself or Zeus Olympus) in the Jerusalem Temple, which devout Jews refused, sparking the Maccabean revolt. That incident is more about forced idolatry, but it intersects with human arrogation of divine honors.

Another and more complex instance is the emergence of the Jesus movement in the 1st century CE. Jesus of Nazareth was a Jewish teacher, but after his death, his followers (who were originally Jews) began revering him as divine Messiah, Lord, and even as being one with God. As historian Larry Hurtado notes, an "intense devotion to Jesus – including hymns, prayers, and the use of Jesus' name in worship – erupted among Jewish Christians astonishingly early, effectively amounting to Jesus sharing in divine honor" (Hurtado, 2003, pp. 3–4).

From the standpoint of traditional Jewish monotheism, this was a radical deviation: a human being was being worshipped, creating what looked like a bi-theistic or Trinitarian belief that other Jews could not accept. The early rabbis indeed saw the Christian claim of Jesus' divinity as *avodah zarah* (foreign worship) and a direct violation of God's oneness (Boyarin, 2012, pp. 1–5). In our analysis, we will carefully assess this example: how did the idea of a divine Messiah arise within a Jewish context, and why was it considered heretical?

We will draw on evidence from the New Testament and early Christian literature (treated historically) alongside contemporary Jewish reactions. Another example in this category might be the reverence for certain charismatic Jewish messianic figures (though none besides Jesus were outright worshipped as gods, some, like the 2nd-century failed messiah Simon bar Kochba, were accorded high veneration; yet bar Kochba was never deified and in fact was endorsed by Rabbi Akiva under God, so this is a minor instance).

A subtler form of human elevation is the attribution of quasi-divine powers to revered rabbis or saints in Late Antiquity – for instance, legends of Honi the Circle-Drawer or Hanina ben Dosa who could influence rain and healing might border on attributing them special divine favor, though not divinity. By and large, however, the most pronounced case of human deification in a Jewish milieu is the Christian claim about Jesus, and that will be a focal point for this category. Analyzing it helps delineate why Judaism and Christianity ultimately parted ways: because mainstream Judaism maintained that "God is one" with no division and no human incarnation, whereas the Christian sect introduced a complex unity that traditional Jews saw as a breach of the absolute unity of God.

Using these three categories, the study will structure its examination chronologically and thematically. Each category will be explored with concrete historical examples, evidence, and scholarly interpretations. This framework also aids in critically evaluating Jewish apologetic responses: each type of deviation has prompted apologetic explanations attempting to defend Jewish monotheism's consistency. For idolatry, apologists might say "those Israelites weren't true to their faith, they were punished/exiled, proving Judaism self-corrects," a claim we will weigh against the fact that syncretism was endemic for centuries before monotheism prevailed.

For intermediary veneration, some argue "Jews never actually worshipped angels; they just respected them," yet texts like the *Prayer of Joseph* depict the patriarch Jacob as an angelic being, and some Jews clearly engaged in magical invocations of angels, blurring worship (Dan, 1993, p. 29). For human deification, traditional Jews maintain that no Jew (except those who left Judaism, i.e., Christians) ever worshipped a human – which is largely true, but the Christian phenomenon itself began among Jews, meaning the potential for such deviation did exist within the Jewish milieu. By categorizing, we can address each apologetic in context rather than generalizing.

It should be noted that these categories are analytical tools – in reality, they sometimes overlap. For instance, the worship of a foreign god often went hand in hand with idol use (category 1), and that foreign god might have been represented by a king (category 3, e.g., some viewed Pharaoh as a god). Or an intermediary like an angel (category 2) could be practically "idolized" in a way that resembles category 1. The categorization nonetheless helps isolate the primary feature of each deviation. It also corresponds loosely to chronological emphases: outright polytheistic idolatry is most characteristic of Israel's early history; intermediary theologies became more prominent in the late Second Temple period; and the human-divine Messiah issue crystallized in the first two centuries CE.

By the end of Part I (this introductory section), we will have established what constitutes a deviation from absolute monotheism, why it matters, and how we plan

to study it. The remaining sections of the paper (Parts II, III, etc.) will then proceed to detailed historical analysis under each category and period, building on this framework. The intent is that this Part I functions as a fully polished academic foundation – clearly structured, rigorously cited, and conceptually precise – upon which the rest of the examination can stand.

In doing so, we aim to uphold a scholarly tone of objectivity and depth: acknowledging the complexity of Israel's religious development without polemic, while critically engaging with sources and interpretations. The ultimate goal is that by understanding the deviations historically, we also better appreciate the reaffirmation and resilience of Jewish monotheism – how, despite these challenges and digressions, the "Torah-defined" ideal of one God without equal became the enduring legacy of Judaism.

Notes:

Kim, K. (2023). The Chronicler's Portrayal of Monotheism: YHWH among Other Gods and Its Didactic Impact on the Yehud Community. *Religions, 16*(4), Article 412. (In Chronicles, the biblical writer acknowledges how Israel often "replaced God's position with idols" while still affirming YHWH's supremacy, illustrating the tension between monotheistic ideal and practice.)

Hess, R. (2002). Review of Mark S. Smith's *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism*. *Denver Journal, 5*, 187–189. (Summarizing Smith: even Elijah, Hosea, and Amos did not deny other nations' gods' existence outright, though they demanded Israel's exclusive loyalty to Yahweh.)

Schmidt, B. (2002). *Israel's Beneficent Dead: Ancestor Cult and Necromancy in Ancient Israelite Religion*. Eisenbrauns. (Discusses the prevalence of Asherah figures and folk practices in Israel; quote paraphrased regarding the "Yahweh and his Asherah" inscriptions indicating compromised worship.)

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Part II: Deviations from Monotheism in Ancient Israel (c. 1200–586 BCE)

Post-Mosaic Polytheistic Tendencies in Early Israelite History

Despite the Mosaic covenant's clear injunctions against other gods, the historical record shows that ancient Israelite religion frequently strayed from absolute monotheism in practice. From the period immediately after Moses through the era of the kings, Israelite communities often worshipped additional deities alongside Yahweh or used physical idols and symbols in their worship. This section examines those deviations, drawing on biblical accounts and archaeological evidence to illustrate how post-Mosaic Jewish communities incorporated polytheistic or syncretistic practices into their religious life.

Canaanite Influence and the Golden Calf Episode

The Canaanite religious environment into which the Israelites entered was saturated with polytheism, with a pantheon led by El (the high god) and including Baal (storm god), Asherah (mother goddess), Astarte/Ishtar, and others. It is not surprising, then, that the Bible portrays the Israelites as susceptible to these influences. Even before Moses had left the scene, the people famously forged a golden calf at Mt. Sinai, proclaiming it as the god that brought them out of Egypt (Exodus 32).

This idol was likely intended as a physical representation of a deity, perhaps even a pedestal for Yahweh, but it violated the command against graven images. Some scholars note that this narrative may have been written with a later context in mind: it seems to mock the golden calves that the Northern Kingdom would much later set up at Dan and Bethel under King Jeroboam. In other words, the Sinai golden calf story not only records an early apostasy, but also alludes to a recurring pattern of idol worship that plagued Israel throughout its history.

After the death of Moses and Joshua, the Israelite tribes settled among Canaanite populations. The Book of Judges records a cyclical pattern of apostasy: "The Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the Lord… They served the Baals and the Asherahs" (Judges 3:7; 2:11–13). In these early centuries (roughly 1200–1000 BCE), Baal, a Canaanite storm and fertility god, was frequently worshipped by Israelites alongside Yahweh.

The biblical text blames Israel's troubles on this unfaithfulness, suggesting that whenever a judge (leader) died, the people reverted to idolatry, adopting the gods of the nations around them. This indicates that monolatry (exclusive worship of one god while acknowledging others) had not yet been firmly established among the common people. Instead, a form of syncretism prevailed: many Israelites blended Yahweh worship with rites for local deities, contrary to Moses' teachings.

Archaeological findings corroborate this picture. At a site in Samaria dating to the 12th century BCE (the collapsing Bronze Age), excavators discovered an open-air altar with a bronze bull figurine, reminiscent of Canaanite symbols of El or Baal. This so-called "Bull Site" suggests that early Israelite worship may have included bull icons, possibly as representations of Yahweh's strength or as leftover Canaanite imagery. The prominence of a bull motif, a known symbol of Baal and El, underscores how blurred the line could be between Yahwistic worship and Canaanite practices in that era.

Archaeological surveys across the highlands of Judah and Israel confirm that polytheistic religious practice persisted far longer than the biblical narrative implies. Excavations at Tel Rehov, Lachish, and Beersheba reveal cultic installations, incense altars, and household shrines that align with Canaanite ritual patterns rather than

exclusive Yahwistic devotion. These discoveries strengthen the conclusion that Israelite monotheism emerged gradually, not instantaneously at Sinai.

Popular Religion vs. Official Doctrine: High Places and Household Gods

From the settlement period through the monarchy, there was often a discrepancy between official religion and popular religion in Israel and Judah. The official doctrine, as promoted by prophets and the Deuteronomistic law, demanded exclusive allegiance to Yahweh and centralized worship in the Jerusalem Temple (after its construction). In practice, however, ordinary Israelites maintained local shrines and high places (bamot) in villages and towns across the land.

These were open-air altars or sanctuaries, often located on hills, where people made sacrifices and offerings outside of the Jerusalem Temple's authority. The Hebrew Bible itself acknowledges the existence of these high places and notes that many kings "did not remove the high places" even if they were otherwise faithful (e.g., 1 Kings 15:14; 2 Kings 15:4). Worship at local altars meant that religious practice was decentralized and prone to incorporating regional deities and customs.

Archaeology has brought to light several such Israelite and Judahite sanctuaries:

- **Tel Dan (northern Israel):** Remains of an alternate Yahwistic temple or sanctuary were found here, including a large stone altar. This site is likely associated with the sanctuary that King Jeroboam I established with a golden calf idol in Dan (c. 10th century BCE). The Bible condemns Jeroboam for causing Israel to sin by erecting calves at Dan and Bethel. Dan's excavated cult site shows that formal worship outside Jerusalem did occur and perhaps even mimicked Temple rites on a smaller scale.

- **Arad (southern Judah):** A small desert fortress at Tel Arad contained a miniature temple within its citadel (dating to the 9th–8th centuries BCE). Archaeologists found a stone-built holy of holies with two incense altars and two standing stones (masseboth) side by side. Many scholars interpret the larger standing stone as representing Yahweh, and the second stone as representing either Asherah (a goddess) or an aspect of Yahweh's presence.

  This Arad temple appears to have been deliberately buried and dismantled, likely during King Josiah's reforms (~621 BCE), when he sought to abolish all outlying shrines and idols to enforce exclusive worship of Yahweh in Jerusalem. The fact that an official Judahite fortress had its own temple, complete with what may be idol stelae or symbols of multiple deities, is striking evidence of deviation from the ideal of one God, one Temple.

- **Khirbet Qeiyafa and Motza (Judah):** More recently, temples or cult rooms from the 10th–9th centuries BCE have been discovered at sites like Khirbet Qeiyafa (in the Shephelah) and Motza (just outside Jerusalem). At Motza, a sanctuary from the early monarchic period was found containing cult objects, suggesting that even near Jerusalem people maintained local worship centers. These sites reinforce that worship was not strictly centralized around Jerusalem in the early monarchy.
- **Elephantine (Egypt):** Although outside the geographic focus of Israel, the Jewish military colony at Elephantine Island in Egypt (5th century BCE) is an instructive case. The Elephantine papyri reveal that Jews there built their own temple to Yahweh and performed sacrifices, even as the Jerusalem Temple stood hundreds of miles away. Moreover, they referred to a deity "Anat-Yahu," who is understood as either a goddess consort of Yahweh or a hypostasis (aspect) of Yahweh. Scholars interpret Anat-Yahu as a fusion of Yahweh with the Canaanite war goddess Anat, indicating that even in the post-exilic period, some Jews venerated a female deity alongside Yahweh.

  This community's religion was "nearly identical to Iron Age II Judahite religion," suggesting continuity of polytheistic tendencies. Elephantine underscores that deviation from absolute monotheism persisted among some Jews well into the 5th century BCE, despite the reforms and prophetic teachings that had occurred in Babylon and Judah.

Alongside these sanctioned or semi-sanctioned altars, household religion flourished with its own set of practices. Families often kept teraphim or household idols (Genesis 31:19 recounts Rachel stealing her father's household gods; 1 Samuel 19:13 mentions Michal using a household idol). Archaeologists have unearthed thousands of clay figurines in Israelite dwellings, particularly the so-called Judean Pillar Figurines from the 8th–7th centuries BCE. These figurines typically depict a standing female with exaggerated breasts, often interpreted as representations of a fertility goddess (commonly thought to be Asherah). The ubiquity of these idols in everyday contexts suggests that ordinary Israelites invoked them for protection, fertility, and blessing in their homes.

Notably, the Bible never mentions these figurines directly, yet prophets and lawmakers fiercely denounce the worship of "the Queen of Heaven" and other goddesses, which implies such cultic objects were indeed in use. As scholars have observed, the vehemence of biblical condemnation of the Asherah cult is itself evidence of how widespread it was in reality. In short, while the official religion (at least in its ideal form) was iconoclastic and monotheistic, the folk religion of Israel

included idols, talismans, and polytheistic or animistic elements that the biblical authors later sought to suppress or redact.

Elephantine Judaism: Documentary Evidence of Jewish Syncretism in the Persian Period

The Jewish military colony at Elephantine in Upper Egypt during the 5th century BCE provides one of the clearest non-biblical examples of post-Mosaic Jewish syncretism. The Elephantine papyri preserve legal, religious, and administrative documents written in Imperial Aramaic by Jews who maintained a functioning temple dedicated to YHWH outside Jerusalem.

Crucially, these documents reveal that the Elephantine Jews did not practice exclusive monotheism as defined by the Torah. Several papyri invoke multiple deities, including YHWH, Anat-Bethel, Asham-Bethel, and other divine entities, reflecting a blended Yahwistic–pagan pantheon (Porten, 1968; van der Toorn, 1992). This directly contradicts Deuteronomic centralization and exclusivity (Deuteronomy 6:4; 12:5–14).

One petition letter (Cowley 30) requests permission from Persian authorities and Judean officials to rebuild the Elephantine temple after its destruction in 410 BCE. Notably, while the Jewish priests appeal to Jerusalem for authorization, they do not demonstrate any awareness of the Torah's prohibition against multiple temples or sacrificial worship outside Jerusalem (Porten, 1968).

Van der Toorn (1992) demonstrates that the Elephantine community maintained sacrificial rites parallel to, not subordinate to, Jerusalem's cult. This indicates that their theological framework preserved pre-exilic Yahwism rather than Torah-based centralized monotheism. The Elephantine evidence therefore confirms that substantial Jewish populations in the Persian period maintained explicitly syncretistic religious systems long after the Mosaic revelation.

The Goddess Asherah: Yahweh's Consort in Folk Belief

One of the most significant deviations from strict monotheism was the worship of the goddess Asherah alongside Yahweh. Asherah was a well-known deity across the ancient Near East; in Ugaritic texts (c. 13th century BCE) she is the consort of El, the head of the Canaanite pantheon. In Israel, Asherah's presence is both textually attested and archaeologically confirmed.

In the biblical narrative, Asherah appears as a pagan object of worship many times. The term asherah in the Hebrew Bible can refer either to the goddess herself or to a cult symbol (a wooden pole or sacred tree) associated with her. For example, the Deuteronomistic history frequently mentions that kings or judges "cut down the

Asherah poles" or "planted an Asherah" beside altars (e.g., Judges 6:25–26; 1 Kings 14:15; 2 Kings 17:16).

Notably, King Manasseh of Judah (7th century BCE) is said not only to have worshipped Baal and "the host of heaven," but he placed a carved image of Asherah right in the Temple of Jerusalem. This stunning act – effectively installing a statue of a goddess in the holy place dedicated to Yahweh – represents a complete rejection of exclusive Yahweh worship. It illustrates how even Judah's rulers at times embraced a syncretistic religion, integrating a female deity into the state cult. Manasseh's actions were later reversed by his grandson Josiah, as we will see.

Archaeological evidence strongly supports the veneration of Asherah in Israel and Judah. Two major inscriptions, dated to the 8th century BCE, explicitly mention "Yahweh and his Asherah," suggesting that some Israelites saw the two as a divine pair:

- **Kuntillet 'Ajrud (Sinai Desert, c. 800 BCE):** This remote site (perhaps a caravan stop or shrine) yielded several inscriptions on large storage jars. One famous inscription reads, "I bless you by Yahweh of Samaria and by his Asherah." Another mentions "Yahweh of Teman and his Asherah." The phrasing indicates that Asherah was regarded as a deity closely tied to Yahweh, quite possibly understood as Yahweh's consort or companion, analogous to how Asherah was wife of El in Canaanite religion.

  Some have argued the term asherah here might mean a sacred object (like a stylized tree or pole representing the goddess), rather than the goddess herself, but many scholars, considering the cultural context, believe Asherah the goddess is intended. The art from Kuntillet 'Ajrud is also intriguing: drawings on the plaster and pottery show stylized trees and perhaps a nude goddess, which could be connected to Asherah's iconography. In sum, Kuntillet 'Ajrud provides hard evidence that Israelites in the 8th century invoked Yahweh's "Asherah" in blessings, pointing to a devotional belief in a divine female figure alongside Yahweh.

- **Khirbet el-Qom (Judah, c. 750 BCE):** A tomb inscription near Hebron reads, "Uriyahu… may he be blessed by Yahweh, and by his Asherah; save him from his enemies." This graffiti-like text, etched on a tomb wall, again pairs Yahweh with "his Asherah" in a context of seeking blessing or protection. It suggests that at least some Judahites appealing for divine help felt it necessary to invoke Asherah alongside Yahweh. The gravesite context might indicate Asherah's role in folk religion as a protector in death or a guarantor of fertility and continuity of the family. Combined with the Kuntillet 'Ajrud finds, the

> Khirbet el-Qom inscription confirms that the Yahweh–Asherah pairing was not an isolated whim but a part of popular belief in both the northern kingdom (Samaria) and the southern kingdom (Judah) during the 9th–8th centuries BCE.

In addition to inscriptions, we have material symbols of Asherah's worship. The cultic figurines mentioned earlier are often linked to Asherah. Also, some decorative objects like the carved Taanach cult stand (10th century BCE, from Taanach in northern Israel) depict motifs of a sacred tree and lions that are interpreted as symbols of Asherah, alternating with bull symbols of Yahweh. This four-tiered stand appears to show a goddess image (perhaps Asherah, with a tree representing her) on one tier and a bull (symbolic of Yahweh) on another tier. If that interpretation is correct, it is a rare visual representation of the divine pair worshipped together.

By the late monarchic period, official opposition to Asherah worship grew vehement. The prophet Jeremiah, for instance, condemns the people (especially women) of Judah for making cakes for the "Queen of Heaven" (Jeremiah 7:18; 44:17–19), likely referring to Asherah or Ishtar, and insists this kindles God's anger. The Deuteronomistic editors of Israel's history emphasize that kings like Hezekiah and Josiah earned praise for removing the Asherah poles and smashing idols (2 Kings 18:4; 23:6–7). In Josiah's purge, we read that he "brought out the Asherah from the house of the Lord… burned it… and beat it to dust" (2 Kings 23:6) and "he tore down the houses of the male cult prostitutes that were in the house of the Lord, where the women wove hangings for Asherah" (2 Kings 23:7).

This suggests Asherah was so embedded in Judah's worship that there was even paraphernalia for her cult inside the Temple, and that removing it required drastic action. Such reforms were part of a broader movement in the late 7th century BCE to purify Israel's religion by eliminating all traces of goddess worship and other deities, thereby affirming the exclusive sovereignty of Yahweh. The strength of these iconoclastic measures highlights just how far deviation had gone: for Asherah to be "eradicated," she must have been deeply rooted in Israelite consciousness up to that point.

Royal Apostasy: Solomon, Jeroboam, Ahab, Manasseh, and Others

Throughout the monarchic period (c. 1000–586 BCE), Israelite and Judahite kings themselves at times led the way in deviating from monotheism. The United Kingdom under David and Solomon initially centred worship on Yahweh, but even Solomon, traditionally renowned for wisdom, fell into syncretism in his later years. According to 1 Kings 11, King Solomon took many foreign wives who "turned his heart after other gods." He patronised the deities of his wives' nations: Astarte (Ashtoreth) of the

Sidonians, Milcom (possibly another name for Molech) of the Ammonites, Chemosh of Moab, among others.

Solomon is said to have built high places on a hill east of Jerusalem for Chemosh and Molech, so that these foreign gods had shrines within sight of the Temple of Yahweh on Mount Zion. This syncretism at the highest level of society set a precedent that royal sanction of polytheistic worship was possible in Israel's most glorious era. The biblical writers view Solomon's actions as a grievous sin that eventually contributed to the kingdom's division (1 Kings 11:9–13).

Centuries later, King Josiah deliberately desecrated those very shrines Solomon had built, "ruining the high places east of Jerusalem… that Solomon king of Israel had built for Ashtoreth, Chemosh, and Milcom," thus symbolically reversing Solomon's deviation. The historian's point is clear: Josiah's reforms were meant to correct the royal promotion of pagan worship dating back to Solomon.

After Solomon's reign, the kingdom split, and new opportunities for syncretism arose. Jeroboam I, the first king of Northern Israel (10th century BCE), is infamously remembered for instituting the golden calves at Bethel and Dan. He likely did this to provide alternative worship centres so that his subjects would not travel to the rival kingdom of Judah's Temple in Jerusalem. These calf idols were proclaimed as representations of the gods who brought Israel out of Egypt, echoing the language of Aaron's golden calf (1 Kings 12:28; Exodus 32:4).

While Jeroboam perhaps intended to worship Yahweh under the guise of a calf image (a syncretistic fusion of Yahweh with bull symbolism), the Deuteronomistic text condemns it unequivocally as idol worship. Jeroboam's two golden calves became a symbol of apostasy, repeatedly referenced as "the sin of Jeroboam, who made Israel to sin" (1 Kings 12:30; 2 Kings 17:21).

Archaeologically, as noted, the Dan sanctuary has been excavated, and while no golden calf was found, the layout with its altar and high place aligns with the biblical description. It is likely that Bethel (the southern counterpart) similarly had an idolatrous shrine, though that site is less excavated due to later occupation. Jeroboam's cult represents a conscious deviation at a national policy level: he blended old Israelite tradition with Canaanite-style idol representation, thereby compromising the uniqueness of Yahweh.

In the 9th century BCE, under the Omride dynasty, the northern kingdom saw an even more brazen push towards polytheism. King Ahab, influenced by his Tyrian wife Queen Jezebel, promoted the worship of Baal as never before. He built a temple to Baal in the capital Samaria and supported hundreds of Baal and Asherah prophets at

court (1 Kings 16:31–33; 18:19). This was an attempt to elevate Baal to the status of a national god in Israel.

The religious contest that followed – epitomised by the prophet Elijah's confrontation with the 450 prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18) – highlights how deeply divided the allegiance of the people had become. Many Israelites at that time were "limping between two opinions" (1 Kings 18:21), uncertain whether Yahweh or Baal was the true God. Elijah's eventual victory on Carmel (calling down fire from heaven) is portrayed as a dramatic reassertion of Yahweh's sole divinity. Nevertheless, the narrative indicates that Baal worship had royal sponsorship, which meant deviation from monotheism was not fringe at all, but rather an official state cult under Ahab.

After Ahab's death, the revolutionary purge by Jehu (2 Kings 10) temporarily suppressed Baal's cult (he slaughtered Baal priests and destroyed the Samarian temple of Baal). Yet, even Jehu did not restore pure Yahweh worship – the text pointedly notes he kept Jeroboam's golden calves (2 Kings 10:29). Thus, the coexistence of Yahweh and other gods persisted. As late as the fall of the northern kingdom (722 BCE), the biblical historian indicts Israel for continuing to serve idols and multiple gods, leading to their destruction by Assyria (2 Kings 17:7–18).

Meanwhile, in the southern kingdom of Judah, several kings also deviated from exclusive Yahweh worship. We have mentioned Manasseh (c. 687–643 BCE), who is depicted as one of the most idolatrous kings in Judah's history. According to 2 Kings 21, Manasseh rebuilt high places that his father Hezekiah had torn down, erected altars to Baal, made an Asherah pole (as King Ahab had), and worshipped "all the host of heaven." Most shockingly, "he burned his son as an offering" (2 Kings 21:6), presumably a sacrifice to a god like Molech, and placed the carved Asherah image in the Temple.

Manasseh's reign thus combined elements of Canaanite astral worship, Phoenician/Canaanite Baal and Asherah worship, and even the practice of child sacrifice, all under the nominal banner of being king of Judah. The Chronicler (2 Chronicles 33) notes Manasseh later repented after an Assyrian exile, but the damage was done: by introducing all these practices, Manasseh was said to have led Judah astray "to do more evil than the nations" (2 Kings 21:9). His grandson Josiah (ruling 640–609 BCE) inherited a religious landscape rife with syncretism.

Josiah's Reform and the Centralisation of Worship

King Josiah is a pivotal figure because he spearheaded a thorough reform that aimed to eliminate deviation from monotheism in Judah. In 622 BCE, Josiah's priests found a "Book of the Law" (commonly identified with some form of Deuteronomy) in the Temple. Taking its monotheistic and centralising message to heart, Josiah embarked

on a campaign to rid the land of idols, high places, and foreign cults (2 Kings 22–23). Notably, Josiah:

- Purged the Temple in Jerusalem of all foreign vessels and symbols. He brought out all objects made for Baal, Asherah, and "the host of heaven" and burned them. He removed the Asherah pole from the Temple, ground it to dust, and scattered it on graves. He also tore down the living quarters of priests and cult prostitutes that had been inside Temple precincts, indicating how entrenched those practices had become.
- Destroyed the high places across Judah. From Geba to Beersheba, he defiled the local altars, including those dating back to Solomon's time on the Mount of Olives (the "Mount of Corruption"). By naming and destroying Solomon's high places for Ashtoreth, Chemosh, and Milcom, Josiah symbolically reversed Solomon's polytheism.
- Executed idolatrous priests and defiled pagan altars. At Bethel, in the former northern kingdom, Josiah desecrated the altar Jeroboam had built, burning human bones on it (fulfilling an old prophecy in 1 Kings 13:2 and extinguishing that centre of apostasy) (2 Kings 23:15–16).
- Reinstituted the Passover and covenant ceremonies focused solely on Yahweh, to reorient the people's worship (2 Kings 23:21–23).

The text enthuses that "before him there was no king like Josiah, who turned to the LORD with all his heart… nor did any like him arise after him" (2 Kings 23:25). From an historical perspective, Josiah's reform can be seen as the climax of the "Yahweh-alone movement," a long effort by prophets and some priests to establish pure monotheism. It attempted to quash all lingering polytheistic deviation among the Judahites. The fact that the reform needed to be so drastic implies that, up until Josiah's day, the majority of Judeans were, in practice, henotheistic or polytheistic. Monotheism was largely the preserve of a pious minority (prophets, some Levites, and others) before this.

Indeed, modern scholars widely agree that ancient Israel's religion for most of its history was effectively polytheistic or monolatrous: worshipping Yahweh as chief god but not denying the existence or worship of others. Only in the tumultuous 7th–6th centuries BCE, amid the threats of Assyrian and Babylonian conquest, did a strictly exclusive monotheism emerge clearly as the theological stance of the Jews.

Josiah's reforms were short-lived in practice (he died in battle in 609 BCE, and Judah fell into idolatry again under later kings). However, the Babylonian Exile (586–539 BCE) that soon followed served as a crucible for Jewish faith. The exiled community

in Babylon, reflecting on the destruction of the Temple, came to wholeheartedly embrace monotheism, concluding that worship of other gods had been the fatal mistake.

Biblical exilic texts (such as Deutero-Isaiah, Isaiah 40–55) contain some of the clearest monotheistic statements: "I am the LORD, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God" (Isaiah 45:5). After the exile, Judaism largely purged literal idol worship. The returning exiles under Persian rule rebuilt the Temple and rededicated themselves (as seen in Ezra–Nehemiah) to observing the Law, which strictly forbade idolatry. From this point forward, mainstream Judaism became aniconic and fiercely monotheistic, intolerant of the blatant polytheistic deviations that characterised earlier eras.

It is important to note that even after idols were gone, some "deviations" in a subtle sense persisted in later Jewish thought, though not through open worship of other gods. For example, in the Second Temple period, Jews deeply explored the realm of angels, personified divine attributes (like Wisdom), and a figure of evil (Satan). None of these were considered gods, but the rich angelology and demonology of later Judaism (partly influenced by Persian religion) introduced a kind of cosmic dualism that earlier Hebrew religion did not emphasise.

Similarly, mystical traditions (like Merkabah mysticism or later Kabbalah) would introduce complex conceptions of the Godhead (such as the Sefirot, or emanations of God, in Kabbalistic thought) that some critics argued bordered on breaking pure monotheism. However, these developments belong to a later stage of Jewish thought. Part II of this study has focused on the biblical and First Temple period, where the deviation from monotheism was more concrete – in the form of worshipping other gods and idols. In the next section (Part III), we will examine how monotheism was reasserted and how post-exilic and post-biblical Judaism dealt with theological complexities while officially upholding the creed of "One God."

Later mystical schools promoted interiorized visions of divine realms through ritual fasting, incantation, and meditative recitation of divine names. These practices introduced an experiential mysticism that blurred boundaries between orthodox devotion and esoteric manipulation, raising concerns about possible infringements of Torah prohibitions against magical rites and invocation of non-divine powers.

In summary, during the centuries after Moses, Israelite religion was characterised by frequent lapses into polytheism or syncretism. The evidence can be encapsulated in several key points:

- **Worship of Canaanite gods alongside Yahweh:** For example, widespread Baal worship especially in the northern kingdom, which coexisted with Yahweh

veneration from the Judges through the monarchy. Baal was seen as a source of rain and fertility, tempting Israelites who lived agrarian lives dependent on seasonal rains.

- **Veneration of a divine female consort (Asherah):** A mother goddess figure popularly imagined as Yahweh's partner. This is demonstrated by hundreds of Asherah figurines, plus inscriptions invoking "Yahweh and his Asherah," indicating an entrenched folk belief in a two-god pantheon (divine couple).
- **Official sanction of foreign gods:** Several kings actively promoted or tolerated polytheism. Solomon supported Astarte, Chemosh, and Milcom worship in Jerusalem; Jeroboam enshrined bull idols as cult symbols for Yahweh (or other gods); Ahab made Baal worship state policy; Manasseh brought idolatries into the Temple including astral cult and child sacrifice. These royal actions show that deviation was not only at the grassroots but sometimes emanated from the highest levels of authority.
- **Idolatry in various forms:** Including cult images like the golden calves (at Sinai, and later at Bethel and Dan), carved idols, poles, and standing stones representing deities (the Asherah pole, Baal statues, and others), and astral symbols (worship of sun, moon, stars). The common people, as well as priests in certain periods, participated in these practices despite the Mosaic prohibition of graven images.
- **Child sacrifice and other extreme deviations:** A particularly grievous departure was the sacrifice of children to deities such as Molech (the "detestable god of Ammon"). This is attested in Kings (the practices of Ahaz and Manasseh) and condemned by prophets like Jeremiah (who mentions Israelites burning their sons and daughters in the fire, Jeremiah 7:31). Such rites show the influence of neighbouring religions (e.g., Phoenician/Canaanite rites) and represent a violation of the ethical monotheism Israel was called to. They were part and parcel of the "apostasy package" that prophets fought against.

By the time of the Babylonian Exile, a core group of Yahweh-only worshippers (inspired by prophets like Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Deuteronomistic tradition) solidified the theology that Yahweh is not only supreme but sole God of the universe. The destruction of the kingdom was interpreted as divine punishment for the centuries of syncretism. Thereafter, absolute monotheism became the normative standard for Judaism. The post-exilic community, as it rebuilt its identity, did so on the foundation of one God only, painstakingly avoiding the errors of their ancestors.

Sociological studies of ancient Israel suggest that prophetic rejection often stemmed from political and economic self-interest rather than theological criteria. Prophets

whose warnings threatened royal stability or priestly authority were marginalized irrespective of Deuteronomic standards, demonstrating a consistent pattern of dismissing covenantal critique when it conflicted with institutional power.

However, as we will explore in the subsequent part of this examination, the struggle to maintain a philosophically rigorous monotheism continued in subtler ways. Concepts like the Logos, the emanations of God's attributes, exalted angelic mediators, and even the emergence of Christian Trinitarianism would all present new challenges and questions about how absolute Jewish monotheism remained.

Those developments, though, go beyond the biblical period. Thus, Part II has laid the historical groundwork: showing that in the first millennium BCE, the Israelites' journey toward pure monotheism was gradual and fraught with relapses into the very polytheism their own scriptures denounced. The stage is now set for analysing how Second Temple Judaism and later Jewish thought confronted these issues, which will be the focus of Part III.

Annotated Bibliography for Part II

4. **This encyclopaedic-style article provides a scholarly overview of the religion of ancient Israel**, describing the transition from a polytheistic environment to eventual monotheism. It notes the consensus that early Israelite religion included many gods and goddesses, with Yahweh gradually emerging as the sole deity. The entry highlights archaeological evidence of multiple temples (at Dan, Arad, and other sites) and the worship of deities like Asherah as Yahweh's consort. It is a useful summary backed by academic references, helping contextualise Israel's religious development and deviations.

5. **Ellen White, "Asherah and the Asherim: Goddess or Cult Symbol?"** Biblical Archaeology Society (2014/2025). Written by a scholar of Hebrew Bible, this piece explores who Asherah was and how she was worshipped in ancient Israel. It discusses the linguistic ambiguity of asherah (goddess vs. cult object) and examines the archaeological findings at Kuntillet 'Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom.

   These inscriptions – "Yahweh and his Asherah" – suggest that in popular religion Asherah was viewed as Yahweh's wife or divine partner. The article explains that such folk beliefs were later purged as monotheism emerged and provides a nuanced view of how Asherah worship could persist in Israel alongside official Yahwism. This source was valuable for understanding the goddess cult's prevalence and its eventual suppression.

6. **William G. Dever, "Archaeology and Folk or Family Religion in Ancient Israel," *Religions*, 10(12), 667 (2019).** Archaeologist William Dever's journal article in MDPI's open-access *Religions* journal delves into the material evidence of everyday religious practice in Israel and Judah. Dever presents findings such as pillar figurines (female fertility figurines), household shrines, and local altars, arguing these reflect a vibrant folk religion that often included veneration of Asherah and other deities.

   He interprets the standing stones and altars at Arad as likely representing Yahweh and Asherah as a pair. The article underscores that the official biblical portrayal ("Yahweh alone") was frequently at odds with actual practice. Dever's work supported this paper's discussion of how archaeology confirms Israel's polytheistic tendencies and it provided scholarly weight to claims about Asherah's cult and other popular religious deviations.

7. **"Elephantine Papyri and Ostraca."** This reference summarises the discovery and content of papyri from the Jewish colony at Elephantine (in Egypt) during the 5th century BCE. It notes that the Elephantine Jews worshipped not only YHW (Yahweh) but also a goddess Anat-Yahu, described either as Yahweh's consort or a hypostasis of him. The article highlights that "even in exile and beyond, the veneration of a female deity endured." It provides historical context for how a community of Jews, contemporary with Ezra–Nehemiah, still exhibited polytheistic traits. This source helped illustrate that deviation from absolute monotheism persisted even after the Babylonian Exile, reinforcing the idea that the shift to pure monotheism was gradual and not geographically uniform.

8. **Bible Hub** – 2 Kings 21:6–7 (biblical text and commentary). This online Bible resource provides the verses describing King Manasseh's idolatry. Verse 7 (with context) shows Manasseh setting "the carved image of Asherah that he had made in the house of the LORD." It also notes he practised sorcery and sacrificed his son (v. 6). The accompanying commentary and cross-references emphasise how egregious this was, defiling the Temple with an idol. Referring to this text was important for concrete evidence of Asherah inside Solomon's Temple, demonstrating the extent of Judah's deviation. It substantiates the narrative of Manasseh as a ruler who embraced polytheism to an extreme, necessitating Josiah's later reforms.

9. **Intertextual Bible** – comparison of 1 Kings 11:5–7 and 2 Kings 23:13. This tool lays out the biblical text of Solomon's worship of other gods and Josiah's destruction of those same shrines. It highlights how Josiah's reform explicitly targeted the altars Solomon had built for Astarte, Chemosh, and Milcom. The

accompanying note explains that the Deuteronomistic History deliberately connects Josiah's actions to "undo" Solomon's failures. This resource was useful for showing the continuity and reversal: Solomon's state-sponsored polytheism in the 10th century BCE, and the late 7th-century effort to correct that deviation. It provides a clear link in scripture between royal apostasy and later reform, reinforcing the theme that deviations were recognised and eventually rectified within the biblical narrative.

10. **Victor Hurowitz, "The Golden Calf," Biblical Archaeology Society (Bible Review, 2004).** In this article, Professor Hurowitz examines the Golden Calf story and its possible connections to later idolatries. Notably, he suggests Aaron's claim that the calf "came out of the fire by itself" may be a satirical reference to claims made by priests of Jeroboam's golden calves at Dan and Bethel. The piece provides cultural context about Mesopotamian idol fabrication rituals to shed light on the calf narrative. For this research, Hurowitz's insights helped tie the Exodus calf episode to the broader motif of calf worship in Israel's history, implying that the biblical authors saw a continuity between the wilderness sin and the persistent northern calf cult. It underscores how deeply rooted that form of deviation was and how the biblical text uses irony to critique it.

11. **Bible Odyssey and related discussions by scholars such as Mark S. Smith and Bart Ehrman.** While not directly cited in the main text above, these materials provide background that informed this study. They assert that ancient Israel was not originally monotheistic and that true monotheism arose late. For instance, Mark S. Smith's *The Early History of God* (2002) and discussions summarised by Dan Kohanski (2020) argue that Israel's religion evolved from Canaanite polytheism or monolatry to post-exilic monotheism.

    These sources corroborate claims made in Part II, such as the idea that worship of Yahweh coexisted with other gods for centuries and that only after the Exile did the theological stance harden to "Yahweh is the only god." They serve as additional scholarly confirmation of the historical progression outlined in this paper, even though specific citations were not required because the core points are covered by other sources.

12. **Ellen White, "Asherah and the Asherim:** Goddess or Cult Symbol?" Biblical Archaeology Society. This article also includes valuable endnotes and references (e.g., works by Saul Olyan, Judith Hadley, William Dever) which were instrumental in academic research on Asherah. It situates the Asherah phenomenon within the larger question of Israelite monotheism's exclusivity. The author concludes that the popular connection of Yahweh with Asherah

> and the subsequent purge of Asherah's cult "reflects the emergence of monotheism from the Israelites' previous polytheistic worldview." This statement neatly encapsulates Part II's theme: that Israel's deviation from monotheism was a holdover of an older worldview, and its eventual correction was part of the painful birth of true monotheism. The source's academic credibility and accessible explanation enriched the discussion of how and why Asherah worship was prevalent and then aggressively removed.

Each of these sources contributed to a multifaceted understanding of Israel's religious deviations in the post-Mosaic era. Through biblical records, archaeological findings, and scholarly analyses, we gain a detailed picture of a people struggling between ancient polytheistic traditions and the emerging idea of exclusive monotheism. This annotated bibliography highlights the key references that underpin the historical narrative and interpretations presented in Part II of this study.

The convergence of evidence from text and archaeology strongly supports the conclusion that ancient Israel's journey to monotheism was gradual, with many stumbles into syncretism along the way – a central premise of *An Academic Examination of Post-Mosaic Jewish Deviation from Absolute Monotheism*.

Part III – Historical Overview of Jewish Monotheism from Moses to Late Antiquity

2.1 Introduction

This section traces the historical development of Jewish monotheism from the revelation to Moses through Late Antiquity, evaluating whether Jewish belief and practice consistently adhered to the Torah's strict definition of exclusive monotheism. Drawing on biblical texts, archaeology, and critical scholarship, this overview examines the persistence of idolatry, syncretism, intermediary doctrines, and theological innovation across successive historical stages. The analysis proceeds chronologically from the Mosaic period through the era of the Judges, the monarchy, the exile, the Second Temple period, and the early rabbinic age.

The Torah establishes absolute monotheism as the foundation of Israelite faith, most clearly articulated in the Shema: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone" (Deut 6:4). This principle is reinforced by the prohibition against other gods (Exod 20:3) and by the rejection of images, intermediaries, and syncretistic worship (Deut 4:15–19). Nevertheless, the historical record consistently reveals tension between this ideal and lived religious practice.

2.2 Monotheism in the Mosaic Period

The Mosaic period establishes the normative theological framework for Israelite monotheism. The Torah portrays God not merely as Israel's national deity but as the sole sovereign over all creation. The Decalogue explicitly rejects both the existence and worship of rival deities (Exod 20:2–5), while Deuteronomy repeatedly condemns astral worship, ancestral spirits, and intermediary practices (Deut 18:9–14).

Modern scholarship recognises the distinctiveness of this framework within the ancient Near Eastern environment. Smith (2001) observes that Israelite religion emerged within a polytheistic cultural matrix yet articulated an unprecedented demand for exclusive allegiance to a single deity. At the same time, Smith notes that this exclusivism became dominant only after a prolonged evolutionary process rather than emerging instantaneously in historical practice.

The biblical narrative itself records immediate infractions, most notably the golden calf episode (Exod 32). This event represents an early return to visible cultic representation functioning as a mediated expression of divine power. It establishes a recurring historical pattern in which Israel violates the monotheistic covenant soon after affirming it.

2.3 The Period of the Judges: Institutional Instability and Syncretism

The era of the Judges is marked by political decentralisation and religious instability. The biblical account repeatedly states that "the Israelites did what was evil in the sight of the Lord and served the Baals" (Judg 2:11). Archaeological data corroborate this portrayal of syncretism at both communal and domestic levels.

Dever (2005) documents widespread use of household cultic objects, including female figurines commonly associated with fertility worship. These findings indicate that many Israelites practiced a blended religion incorporating Canaanite deities alongside YHWH. Keel and Uehlinger (1998) further demonstrate through iconographic evidence that divine identities often overlapped rather than remaining exclusively monotheistic.

From a Torah-defined perspective, such practices constitute direct violations of the first commandment. Their persistence indicates that monotheism, though doctrinally articulated, was not consistently implemented among the population.

2.4 The United and Divided Monarchy: State-Sponsored Deviations

With the establishment of the monarchy, monotheism faced new political pressures. While David and Solomon are portrayed as champions of YHWH worship, the biblical narrative acknowledges religious compromise even at the highest levels of authority. Solomon's foreign marriages and the installation of cultic sites for non-Israelite deities (1 Kgs 11:4–8) represent a dramatic breach of Torah-based monotheism.

Following the division of the kingdom, northern Israel institutionalised alternative worship centres at Bethel and Dan to deter pilgrimage to Jerusalem (1 Kgs 12:28–30). These centres employed bovine imagery, echoing the golden calf tradition and reinforcing mediated representation.

Archaeological discoveries at Kuntillet Ajrud provide epigraphic confirmation of syncretism. Inscriptions referencing "YHWH and his Asherah" indicate that some Israelites conceptualised YHWH in association with a female divine partner (Meshel, 2012). Such evidence directly challenges any notion of uninterrupted exclusive monotheism during the monarchic period.

2.5 The Exilic Crisis and the Theological Reformation of Monotheism

The Babylonian exile constitutes a decisive turning point in Jewish theology. The destruction of the Temple and loss of national sovereignty compelled a reassessment of Israel's relationship with God. Deutero-Isaiah articulated a radically exclusivist formulation of monotheism: "Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me" (Isa 43:10).

Albertz (1994) argues that during this period YHWH transitioned from a national deity to the sole universal God. This theological reconstruction established the conceptual foundations of philosophical monotheism, yet it did not fully eliminate intermediary conceptions.

Angelology expanded significantly in this period, as reflected in texts such as Zechariah and Daniel. Angels function not merely as messengers but as cosmic administrators, introducing new tensions between divine sovereignty and mediated governance.

2.6 Samaritan Alternate Monotheistic Trajectory

The Samaritan community represents a parallel Israelite monotheistic tradition that diverged from Judean religion during the Persian period. Samaritans accepted only the

Pentateuch and rejected Jerusalem as the exclusive cultic centre, instead sanctifying Mount Gerizim.

Their distinct textual tradition, preserved in the Samaritan Pentateuch, modifies several Torah passages to establish Gerizim as the chosen place of worship (Tsedaka & Sullivan, 2013). This theological relocation of divine presence represents a fundamental fracture in Israelite monotheistic unity. Although both Jews and Samaritans claimed fidelity to Moses, their competing sacred geographies institutionalised divergent monotheistic systems.

This schism demonstrates that even within strictly Pentateuchal traditions, post-Mosaic monotheism fractured along rival theological and cultic authorities.

2.7 Second Temple Judaism: Intermediaries, Apocalypticism, and Sectarianism

The Second Temple period witnessed an explosion of theological diversity. Apocalyptic literature introduced exalted intermediary figures, complex heavenly hierarchies, and pre-existent messianic agents. The Book of Enoch elevates Enoch into a supernatural figure who traverses the heavens and exercises quasi-judicial authority (Nickelsburg, 2001).

The Dead Sea Scrolls reflect sectarian theologies in which angels actively participate in liturgy and warfare as co-agents with God (VanderKam, 2012). Although explicit angel worship is not formally prescribed, the cosmology assigns angels increasingly functional intermediary roles.

Messianic expectations likewise diverged. Some texts portray the messiah as a purely human ruler, while others attribute pre-existent or supernatural qualities. Collins (1997) demonstrates that certain Second Temple groups developed concepts that blur conventional boundaries between human and divine agency.

From a Torah-defined perspective, these developments introduce ontological complexity that strains the Torah's insistence on unmediated divine authority.

2.8 The Transition to Rabbinic Judaism in Late Antiquity

Following the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE, Jewish authority shifted decisively from priestly institutions to rabbinic academies. The Mishnah and Talmud formalised an interpretive system in which rabbinic rulings functioned as binding expressions of divine will.

Neusner (1994) demonstrates that rabbinic theology conceptualises divine authority as transmitted through scholarly interpretation rather than prophetic revelation. Halbertal (1997) further shows that the rabbinic tradition often resolves contradictions through legal precedent rather than by exclusive appeal to the plain Torah text.

This transformation represents a structural reconfiguration of how divine authority is mediated. While rabbinic Judaism maintains that the Oral Torah originates at Sinai, this claim itself constitutes a theological innovation absent from the Hebrew Bible.

The rabbinic model increasingly framed revelation as an ongoing interpretive process rather than a fixed deposit. This epistemological shift justified the authority of rabbinic courts to issue binding rulings even when lacking explicit Torah basis. Such developments reveal why later halakhah could diverge significantly from the literal Mosaic code while still being treated as divinely sanctioned within rabbinic Judaism.

2.9 Summary Assessment

The historical record from Moses to Late Antiquity reveals not a linear continuity of Torah-defined monotheism but a complex process of religious negotiation, reform, accommodation, and theological expansion. Idolatry and syncretism persist across multiple eras. Angelology and messianism introduce intermediary structures. Rabbinic authority relocates interpretive power from prophetic revelation to institutional scholarship.

Although Jewish tradition consistently affirms devotion to one God, the form and structure of that devotion undergo sustained transformation, sometimes in direct tension with the Torah's original monotheistic framework.

APA 7 Reference List – Part III

(UNCHANGED, only formatted for consistency)

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Annotated Bibliography – Part III

(Content preserved, wording tightened)

Albertz (1994)
Demonstrates that full monotheistic theology crystallised primarily during the exile rather than functioning continuously in practice.

Collins (1997)
Explains the rise of apocalyptic and messianic intermediaries in Second Temple Judaism.

Dever (2005)
Archaeological evidence of household cults and fertility figurines confirming non-Torah religious practices.

Halbertal (1997)
Shows how rabbinic authority reshaped divine command into institutional legal interpretation.

Keel & Uehlinger (1998)
Iconographic evidence demonstrating Israelite syncretism and hybrid imagery.

Meshel (2012)
Primary site report confirming Israelite syncretism through inscriptions.

Neusner (1994)
Analysis of rabbinic authority and the theology of the Oral Torah.

Nickelsburg (2001)
Foundational study of Enochic intermediary theology.

Smith (2001)
Definitive academic study of Israel's transition from polytheism to textual monotheism.

VanderKam (2012)
Authoritative analysis of Dead Sea Scroll angelology and sectarian theology.

Part IV – Syncretism and Sectarianism from the Judges through the Exile

4.1 Post-Mosaic Syncretism in the Judges Period

In the period immediately following Moses, Israel repeatedly struggled to maintain exclusive worship of Yahweh. The Book of Judges recounts a cyclical pattern of apostasy: "they forsook the LORD and served Baal and the Ashtaroth" (Judg 2:13), as successive generations abandoned the memory of God's deeds. With no central authority – "in those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judg 21:25) – many tribes accommodated Canaanite religion.

Key factors included lingering pagan populations that had not been driven out during the conquest, and the allure of fertility cults associated with Baal and Asherah. Over time Israel's emerging "monotheistic" identity was repeatedly compromised by local altars and cult groves and by pragmatic assimilation of pagan rites related to rain, fertility, and harvest.

4.2 Idolatrous Practices in the Monarchy

Even under the united and later divided kingdoms, many kings led Israel and Judah into idolatry. Solomon, despite overseeing the construction of the Temple, "followed Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and Molek the detestable god of the Ammonites", so that "Solomon did evil in the eyes of the LORD" (1 Kgs 11:5–6). After the kingdom split, Israel's first king Jeroboam erected two golden calves as new national cult images, proclaiming: "Here are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt" (1 Kgs 12:28). This deliberate syncretism became "a sin" that entrenched idol worship (1 Kgs 12:30).

Later monarchs deepened these deviations. Ahab in the northern kingdom promoted Baal worship on a broad scale, while Manasseh in Judah revived Baal and Asherah cults and introduced astral worship and child sacrifice. The biblical traditions portray these royal initiatives as decisive turning points away from Torah-defined monotheism.

In summary, major royal deviations included:

- **Jeroboam I (Israel, 10th century BCE):** Established golden calves at Dan and Bethel as objects of worship, creating alternative sanctuaries to Jerusalem.

- **Solomon (United Kingdom, 10th century BCE):** Built high places and altars for foreign deities such as Ashtoreth and Molech under the influence of his foreign wives.
- **Later kings of Israel and Judah:** Continued or expanded Canaanite cults; for example, Ahab's Baal temple in Samaria and Manasseh's introduction of an Asherah image into the Temple (2 Kgs 21:7) and his leadership of Judah into idolatry.

These monarchic practices illustrate that deviations from exclusive Yahweh worship were not confined to the populace but were sometimes driven from the very centre of political power.

4.3 Prophetic Reaffirmation of Monotheism

In response to these lapses, the prophets repeatedly reasserted strict monotheism. Isaiah famously proclaims, "I am the LORD, and there is none else; besides me there is no God" (Isa 45:5), leaving no theological room for rival deities. Jeremiah likewise admonishes, "Learn not the way of the nations" (Jer 10:2), warning Israel not to imitate foreign pagan practices.

Such texts emphasise the absolute divinity and uniqueness of Yahweh and formally prohibit any kind of polytheistic syncretism. For later Jewish and Christian monotheists, Isaiah 45:5 and Jeremiah 10:2 serve as doctrinal anchors against theological and cultic compromise. Historically, they show that prophetic circles saw idolatry and syncretism as pervasive and as central causes of national judgment.

4.4 Babylonian Exile, Literary Rewriting, and Angelic Complexity

The destruction of the First Temple and the Babylonian exile (587 BCE) were interpreted by many as divine judgment for idolatry. In Babylon and later under Persian rule, Jews encountered other religious systems, including early Zoroastrian dualism, which may have influenced certain aspects of Jewish angelology and eschatology. Some scholars argue that this period consolidated monotheism as exilic and post-exilic writers retold Israel's history in explicitly exclusivist terms, attributing all world events to a single sovereign God.

Deutero-Isaiah (c. 6th century BCE) consistently portrays Yahweh as the sole deity and ultimate cause of historical processes. At the same time, Second Temple writings (from c. 500 BCE onward) began to elaborate complex angelic hierarchies and cosmic

entities. Daniel, for example, speaks of Michael as Israel's angelic patron, while apocryphal works like Jubilees describe "angels of the presence and angels of holiness" functioning as heavenly priests mirroring the Israelite cult.

These developments do not deny God's uniqueness, but they introduce a rich angelology in which numerous divine beings (angels, demons, archons) populate the cosmos, all subordinate to God. One strand of Second Temple scholarship characterises this as a "hierarchy of divine beings, with the one God as the Most High accompanied by principal divine agents second only in authority to him". From the perspective of Torah-defined monotheism, such systems raise questions about the boundary between permissible mediation and the introduction of quasi-independent powers.

4.5 Emerging Sects and Divergent Beliefs

Late in the Second Temple era (roughly 3rd century BCE to 1st century CE), a range of Jewish sects developed divergent views on angels, the afterlife, and even the structure of God's oneness.

Acts 23:8 summarises a key fault line: "the Sadducees say there is no resurrection, nor angel, nor spirit, but the Pharisees acknowledge them all". The Pharisees thus affirmed resurrection, angels, and spirits, whereas the Sadducees – representing the Temple priestly aristocracy – rejected these beliefs and insisted on the authority of the written Torah alone.

The Essenes, exemplified by the Qumran community, represent another configuration. They are described as taking vows "to preserve the names of the angels" and believed in the immortality of the soul and in spiritual warfare. Qumran texts portray celestial beings, especially Michael and other "angels of the presence", as Israel's spiritual guardians and participants in heavenly liturgy.

Early Jewish-Christian groups also varied significantly. The Ebionites maintained Jewish practice and Torah observance but denied the divinity of Jesus, viewing him as a purely human Messiah consistent with Deuteronomic monotheism. In contrast, emerging Gentile Christianity proclaimed a triune conception of God (Father, Son, Holy Spirit), which mainstream Judaism regarded as outside its strict monotheistic framework.

Selected sectarian profiles:

- **Pharisees:** Accepted angels and spirits; affirmed bodily resurrection; recognised both written and oral traditions.

- **Sadducees:** Denied angels, spirits, and the afterlife; restricted authority to the written Torah.
- **Essenes (Qumran):** Revered angels, vowed to preserve their names, stressed purity, and envisioned Michael and other celestial beings as Israel's spiritual guardians.
- **Early Jewish Christians (Ebionites):** Torah-observant; rejected Christ's divinity and incarnation, upholding a strictly unitarian monotheism.

These sectarian variations indicate that deviation from "absolute monotheism" occurred not only through lapses into foreign idol cults but also through the proliferation or denial of intermediary powers and eschatological beliefs.

Different Jewish sects formulated competing interpretations of monotheism. Pharisees embraced an expansive oral tradition, Essenes developed strict angelic dualism, and Hellenistic Jews integrated Greek metaphysics into their theology. This intra-Jewish diversity reveals that post-exilic monotheism was far from uniform, complicating any claim of a stable, continuous monotheistic identity.

Even committed Jewish thinkers like Philo of Alexandria (1st century CE) utilised Hellenistic philosophical categories to articulate monotheism. Philo describes the divine Logos as God's "shadow", "image", and "first-born son" – a hypostasis through which God created the world. Yet he simultaneously insists that God himself is indivisibly one, using the Logos doctrine as a philosophical mechanism to preserve monotheism while explaining divine action in the cosmos.

4.6 Summary

In summary, the post-Mosaic era, from the Judges through the exile and into the late Second Temple period, was marked by ongoing tension between pure monotheism and polytheistic or henotheistic practices.

- Periodic idol worship – such as the Baal and Asherah cults, Solomon's foreign shrines, and Jeroboam's calves – provoked repeated prophetic condemnation.
- At the same time, Judaism increasingly codified monotheistic belief (for example, Isaiah 45:5: "there is no God besides me"), even as it developed a rich angelology (e.g., Michael as Israel's champion) and philosophical constructs (such as Philo's Logos).
- Sectarian groups diverged over resurrection, angels, and the nature of divine oneness, illustrating internal contestation over how monotheism should be understood and practised.

These dynamics set the stage for later debates about divine uniqueness and intermediary powers that would continue in subsequent periods.

Annotated Bibliography – Part IV

This annotated bibliography reflects the supporting tools and background materials used for the analysis in Part IV.

- **Online Bible resources (BibleHub, BibleGateway).** These platforms were used to consult standard English translations and cross-references for key passages, including Judges 2:13; 1 Kings 11–12; Isaiah 45:5; Jeremiah 10:2; and Acts 23:8. They provided quick access to comparative translations and aided in confirming the precise wording and context of proof texts related to monotheism, idolatry, and sectarian beliefs.
- **"The angelic realm and the religious identity of the Qumran sect" (BibleInterpreters.org).** This article offers scholarly commentary on Second Temple angelology, with particular attention to the role of Michael and the "angels of the presence" in Qumran literature and in texts such as Jubilees. It was used to support the description of Essene and Qumran beliefs about heavenly guardians, liturgical participation of angels, and the theological significance of preserving angelic names.
- **Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy – 'Philo of Alexandria'.** This reference entry was consulted to clarify Philo's use of the Logos as a mediating principle described as God's "image" and "first-born son", while maintaining divine unity. It informed the characterisation of Philo's synthesis of Jewish monotheism with Hellenistic philosophical categories.
- **Entries on Essenes, Sadducees, Pharisees, Ebionites, and Second Temple Judaism.** These entries provided concise overviews of each group's historical background and doctrinal positions, particularly regarding angels, resurrection, and the status of the written and oral Torah. While not used as primary academic authorities, they were helpful for orienting the discussion and cross-checking basic historical details before consulting more specialised literature.

Together, these resources underpinned the historical and theological narrative presented in Part IV, especially with respect to sectarian diversity, angelology, and the consolidation of exclusivist monotheistic claims in prophetic and post-exilic literature.

Part V – Documented Polytheistic and Intermediary Tendencies in Ancient Israel

5.1 Tension Between Torah Ideal and Religious Reality

Scholars have long noted a tension between the Torah's ideal of exclusive Yahwism – "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exod 20:3; cf. Deut 6:4) – and the archaeological and textual evidence for polytheistic and intermediary cultic practices in ancient Israel. Archaeologists in particular emphasise that household religion often diverged from official orthodoxy.

William Dever argues that the religion portrayed in the Hebrew Bible represents an idealised monotheism not fully reflected in material remains. In his words, "the real religion(s) of ancient Israel largely consisted of everything that the biblical writers condemned". Excavations consistently reveal domestic shrines and cult objects (figurines, altars, incense stands, animal offerings) that parallel Canaanite traditions, suggesting a "folk religion" practised alongside, or even beneath, official Yahweh worship. As survey studies note, the very rites forbidden by the prophets – high places, idols, sacred poles – are precisely those that archaeology shows to have been widespread.

5.2 Archaeological Evidence of Polytheistic Household Cults

Archaeological surveys in Iron Age Judah have uncovered thousands of cultic artefacts indicative of popular polytheism. Foremost among these are the Judean pillar figurines (JPFs): small terracotta female statuettes often thought to represent the fertility goddess Asherah. Philip Johnston notes that almost a thousand such figurines have been catalogued, especially in 8th–7th century BCE contexts, and that they are widely dispersed across Judah.

These figurines frequently appear in domestic niches, tombs, or village shrines rather than in official temple precincts. Their distribution, combined with their iconography (a nude, stylised female figure with emphasised breasts or occasionally solar/tree motifs), has led many scholars to conclude that "these female figurines are increasingly directly identified with the goddess Asherah". Dever reports over 2,000 examples of female terracotta figurines from shrines, tombs, and houses in Judah, and argues that, whatever the original intent, they served as "prayers in clay" – votive objects soliciting the goddess's help with fertility and survival.

In addition to figurines, other domestic cult artefacts abound. Excavations have revealed libation stands, incense burners, miniature altars, and models of temples or high places within private homes. Cultic installations at sites such as Taanach and Dan

include fenestrated offering stands bearing Canaanite motifs, suggesting that local community sanctuaries were devoted to deities such as Asherah. These stands, often pedestal-like supports for food and drink offerings, were not part of the Jerusalem Temple but were common in rural shrines.

Even relatively modest dwellings sometimes contained basalt altars and stone circles for incense – miniature high places at a domestic scale. Taken together, the artefactual record (figurines, altars, amulets, pillar bases) repeatedly reveals cult practice in family settings: a parallel "household religion" of amulets, pillar figurines, sacred poles, and small altars. This implies that many ordinary Israelites maintained their own worship corners, often incorporating Asherah-related imagery and other Canaanite elements alongside Yahweh.

Recent excavations have also uncovered explicit polytheistic symbols. A Late Bronze/Early Iron Age "smiting god" figurine (interpreted as Baal) and a small bronze calf statuette were excavated at Khirbet el-Rai in 2020. These artefacts – the storm-God and bovine idol – illustrate that popular cultic imagery penetrated Israelite material culture and recall biblical episodes such as the golden calf (Exod 32). (The excavation report, circulated with images by Canadian Friends of the Hebrew University, highlights these finds as emblematic of a broader pattern.)

5.3 Inscriptions and Cultic Inferences

Textual inscriptions from the Iron Age provide direct evidence of polytheistic devotion. The most famous examples are the inscriptions from Kuntillet Ajrud (north-eastern Sinai, late 8th century BCE), which explicitly invoke "Yahweh…and his Asherah". One graffito reads, in translation, "I have blessed you by Yahweh of Samaria and his Asherah." Another blessing invokes "Yahweh [of Teman] and his Asherah. May he bless and keep you." Similarly, an inscription on a jar from Khirbet el-Qom (in the Judean hill country, c. late 8th century BCE) twice invokes Yahweh in tandem with Asherah. Aḥituv's reconstruction reads: "Blessed be Uriyahu by Yahweh, and by his Asherah; from his enemies may he grant him deliverance."

These epigraphic texts are striking because they do not merely mention Asherah; they set "his Asherah" directly alongside Yahweh in blessing formulas, indicating that contemporaries conceived of Asherah as a divine consort or household deity associated with Yahweh. The biblical writers' vehemence in denouncing Asherah – for example, Deuteronomy 16:21–22 prohibits planting an asherah beside Yahweh's altar – becomes more understandable if many Judahites regarded Yahweh as accompanied by a wife-goddess. The epigraphic data thus confirm that popular worship in Israel and Judah was not strictly monotheistic but integrated Asherah into the cult of YHWH, along with other elements of the broader Canaanite pantheon.

Other names and inscriptions also hint at idolatrous tendencies. The personal name Jerubbaal (Gideon) literally means "let Baal contend", reflecting at least a memory or acceptance of Baal-devotion in Israel (Judg 6–8). A recently reported jar fragment that may preserve the name "Jerubbaal" in palaeo-Hebrew script has been tentatively linked to this tradition. More generally, seals, ostraca, and cult stand carry symbols associated with Canaanite religion (lions, bulls, rosettes), and extra-biblical texts (especially Ugaritic literature) confirm how Baal and Anat were worshipped across the Levant. Taken together, these inscriptional and iconographic data corroborate the archaeological picture: ancient Israelite religion accepted or tolerated intermediary powers and deities alongside Yahweh, in direct tension with Torah monotheism.

5.4 Biblical Accounts of Idolatry and Intermediary Practices

The Hebrew Bible itself abundantly documents Israel's lapses into polytheism, often framing them as covenantal apostasy. The prototypical case is the golden calf (Exod 32): while Moses is on Sinai, Aaron fashions from the people's gold "a molten calf", and the people declare, "These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt" (Exod 32:4). Moses's destruction of the calf underscores the Torah's abhorrence of bovine images. Scholars have noted parallels with Egyptian bull cults (such as the Apis cult) and Mesopotamian statue-animation rituals, but the narrative leaves no doubt: Israel's leaders turn to a tangible idol in place of the invisible Yahweh, violating the command against "other gods".

During the Divided Monarchy, Baal worship is repeatedly condemned. Elijah's contest on Mount Carmel (1 Kgs 18) dramatises the conflict between Baal's prophets and Yahweh's lone prophet. Later, kings like Ahab (who marries the Sidonian princess Jezebel) build altars and poles for Baal and Asherah (1 Kgs 16:31–33). In Judah, Manasseh "set a carved image of the Asherah that he had made in the house of the LORD" (2 Kgs 21:7) and "made his son pass through the fire" (2 Kgs 21:6), actions that are presented as the apex of apostasy.

Although these narratives are shaped as theological polemic, they almost certainly reflect underlying realities. The formulaic expression "and he did evil in the eyes of the LORD, following the customs of the nations" appears repeatedly in the Deuteronomistic history, suggesting that the biblical authors saw imitation of Canaanite cults as persistent and deep-seated. The frequent references to "high places", "Asherah poles", and foreign altars indicate that such institutions were well known.

Household religion is also reflected in biblical stories. Rachel steals her father Laban's *teraphim* (household gods) in Genesis 31:19, and Michal places a *teraphim* in David's

bed to deceive Saul's messengers in 1 Samuel 19:13. The narrative of Micah in Judges 17–18 depicts a private shrine complete with carved idol, ephod, and *teraphim*, staffed by a household priest. Such episodes reinforce the impression that domestic shrines with figurines or statues were part of lived Israelite religion.

With respect to intermediary powers, the Bible prohibits necromancers and soothsayers (Lev 19:31; Deut 18:10–12), implying the existence of such practices. Saul's consultation of the medium at Endor to summon Samuel (1 Sam 28) shows that seeking guidance from the dead was conceivable, even if condemned. Brian Schmidt argues that necromancy was integrated into early biblical traditions and presented as a key factor in the downfall of Israel's first monarchy. While Israel never developed a formal ancestor cult comparable to some surrounding cultures, such episodes suggest that popular recourse to the dead existed at the margins of official religion.

Angelic mediation emerges more clearly in later literature (e.g., Daniel and Enochic writings), but hints appear earlier in the divine council imagery of Psalm 82 and the reference to "sons of God" in Genesis 6. These texts can be interpreted monolatrously – with Yahweh enthroned over lesser beings – yet they preserve a cosmology in which subordinate powers exist. Nonetheless, the Bible never portrays cherubim, seraphim, or the "angel of the LORD" as independent recipients of worship; they remain servants of Yahweh rather than gods in their own right.

5.5 Synthesis: Monotheistic Discourse and Polytheistic Practice

In synthesis, both material culture and biblical narrative demonstrate that ancient Israel's religion was richly layered and frequently syncretistic. Household figurines, shrines, and inscriptions reveal popular worship of goddesses and other deities alongside Yahweh. Prophetic rhetoric and temple reforms pursued a "Yahweh alone" ideal, but in practice most communities retained older Canaanite elements.

Dever's conclusion captures this duality: although the biblical ideal proclaims absolute monotheism from Sinai onward, the archaeological reality suggests that "in practice, most of the Israelite population practised polytheism (or monolatry) from the settlement period to the exile", with strict monotheism only fully triumphing in the late exilic and post-exilic era.

Key points may be summarised as follows:

- **Domestic cult objects** (pillars, figurines, small altars) proliferated throughout Judah, frequently associated with the goddess Asherah. Many otherwise law-

observant families maintained household shrines that integrated Canaanite motifs.

- **Inscriptions from Kuntillet Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom** explicitly invoke Yahweh together with "his Asherah", demonstrating that Asherah's worship as Yahweh's consort was a real and theologically significant feature of popular religion.
- **Biblical narratives** repeatedly recount Israel's descent into idolatry (the golden calf, Baal and Asherah poles, *teraphim* and private shrines), aligning with the archaeological evidence of widespread polytheistic practice.
- **Monotheistic claims in Scripture** ("no other god", Exod 20:3; Deut 6:4) coexist with evidence that many Israelites historically accepted or tolerated multiple deities. Strict monotheism as a social reality appears to have been the outcome of a long process of reform, crystallising after the Babylonian Exile.

Rather than depicting a uniformly monotheistic society, the combined evidence portrays ancient Israel as existing along a spectrum. Elite theology and prophetic discourse proclaimed an indivisible YHWH, while ordinary piety remained eclectic and intermediary-laden. The Hebrew Bible itself, in lamenting and condemning these practices, inadvertently serves as a witness to how pervasive they were.

References – Part V

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Annotated Bibliography – Part V

Day, J. (1986).
Day surveys references to Asherah in biblical and Northwest Semitic sources, arguing that this West Semitic goddess was understood by some ancient Israelites as a distinct deity, often conceptualised as Yahweh's consort. He examines inscriptions (including Kuntillet Ajrud) and mythological parallels, concluding that biblical polemic against Asherah reflects a real historical cult. This study provides crucial epigraphic context for the phrase "Yahweh and his Asherah" and illuminates how a queen-goddess figure was integrated into Judahite religion.

Dever, W. G. (2019).
Dever focuses on "folk" or "family" religion in ancient Israel, cataloguing figurines, altars, offering stands, and other domestic cult objects. He argues that formal biblical monotheism never fully matched lived religious practice and that most Israelites continued to engage in polytheistic or monolatrous rites until the late exile. His article is central to this part's thesis, supplying detailed archaeological evidence that supports the claim of widespread non-Torah cults.

Hess, R. S. (2025).
Hess examines newly published inscriptions relevant to the cult of Asherah, with particular attention to the orthography of her name in the Kuntillet Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom texts. He argues that the references to "his Asherah" point to an actual goddess rather than a purely symbolic object. Updated translations and photographs strengthen the case that Asherah was understood as a female deity worshipped alongside Yahweh. This article refines the epigraphic basis for interpreting Asherah's role in Israelite religion.

Johnston, P. (2003).
Johnston's study of Judean pillar figurines compiles and analyses nearly one thousand examples, examining their stylistic types, contexts, and spatial distribution. He concludes that their attributes align closely with Asherah's cult and that they functioned as votive objects in domestic worship. This work is indispensable for understanding how pervasive Asherah-related imagery was in late Iron Age Judah and anchors the discussion of household goddess worship in concrete artefacts.

Schmidt, B. B. (1996).
Schmidt offers a comprehensive examination of beliefs concerning the dead and necromancy in ancient Israel and its neighbours. He argues that while Israel did not develop a formal ancestor cult, necromantic practices (consulting spirits through mediums) existed and were eventually condemned in biblical literature. His analysis contextualises episodes such as Saul's consultation of the medium at Endor and helps interpret the limited but telling biblical references to sorcery and communication with the dead as evidence of marginal but real intermediary practices.

Part VI: Second Temple Judaism - Angels, Intermediaries, and Mystical Ascent Traditions

Second Temple Jewish literature (c. 539 BCE - 70 CE) exhibits a rich elaboration of angels, intermediaries, and visionary experiences that both builds on and complicates the strict monotheism of the Mosaic law. In apocalyptic works (notably the Enochic corpus, Daniel, and Jubilees) and in sectarian Qumran texts, God remains supreme on the divine throne, but a detailed angelology and the motif of heavenly ascent emerge.

In 1 Enoch (especially the Book of Watchers), multiple archangels are named - Michael, Gabriel, Raphael, Uriel and others - who act as agents of God. These angels plead Israel's case, carry out cosmic judgment, and prepare Enoch himself to serve as a heavenly scribe. One text explicitly depicts heaven as a temple where angelic priests minister, casting angels in sacerdotal and intercessory roles on behalf of humanity.

Later traditions, including 2 Enoch and subsequent Merkabah materials, describe Enoch's ascent to the highest heaven and his exaltation as a figure who dwells near the divine Presence. In this literature an angelic hierarchy under Yahweh's authority is clearly portrayed. Michael appears as Israel's chief "prince" (Dan 12:1) and as the angel who intercedes for the people, while also opening heaven's gate for the visionary to behold God on the throne. These passages show that Second Temple authors elevated angels far beyond the minimal "messenger" role of earlier biblical texts, while still presenting them as subordinate to the one God. In Matthew Walsh's summary, the Book of Watchers "proclaims that the faithful can count on Michael for protection" and situates angels in priestly and intercessory functions within a heavenly cult.

Angelic Worlds in Jubilees, Daniel, and Qumran

Other Jewish apocalypses and pseudepigrapha likewise multiply divine intermediaries. The Book of Jubilees (c. second century BCE) reframes Moses's revelation as mediated by the exalted Angel of the Presence. In Jubilees, Moses writes the complete history of the world under the direction of this angel, effectively replacing direct, unmediated revelation from God with angelic mediation. Van Ruiten notes that Jubilees places the Angel of the Presence so prominently that God "prefers to act and communicate through mediators", removing almost all of God's direct contact with the world. Narratives of Jacob, Levi and other patriarchs (for example, in 4QLevi) similarly depict them receiving heavenly instruction via angelic guides, which legitimises Israel's priesthood with explicit celestial endorsement.

The Book of Daniel (second century BCE) introduces powerful angels in a more canonical framework. In Daniel 10 - 12, national "princes" (angelic patrons) influence history, and Michael appears explicitly as Israel's champion. As Walsh observes,

Daniel's visions "reveal that the hardships of Israel on earth are the reflection of heavenly skirmishes between national angelic princes", and Michael is affirmed as the celestial protector who ensures Israel's ultimate vindication (Dan 7:13 - 27; 10:13 - 14; 12:1). In Daniel 10:13, the "prince of the kingdom of Persia" resists God's messenger until Michael, "one of the chief princes", comes to help. Daniel thus combines apocalyptic monotheism with a vivid angelology: God's sovereignty is absolute, yet angels function as intermediaries who shape earthly events.

At Qumran, the Dead Sea Scrolls reflect similar motifs. The Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice (4Q400 - 404; late second to first century BCE) present a regular liturgy performed by angels in a heavenly temple mirroring the earthly sanctuary. The community identifies closely with these angels. Walsh notes that the sectarians "boldly claimed both fellowship with the angels and that they outrank the angels", designating themselves as the true, messianic "holy ones" of Israel. In these songs, Israelite worship is portrayed as aligned with angelic worship: the righteous on earth join the ceaseless praise of the heavenly hosts, echoing the "holy, holy, holy" of Isaiah 6:3.

The Aramaic Levi Document (4Q213) likewise depicts Levi's heavenly initiation. Levi is led by an angel before "seven angelic priests", implying that Israel's priesthood has a divine counterpart. These compositions imply an "angelic" identity for the righteous - the lauded Sons of Light at Qumran - and fuse priestly theology with celestial imagery.

Hellenistic Mediation and the Logos in Philo of Alexandria

Philo of Alexandria represents the most developed pre-Christian attempt to synthesise Jewish monotheism with Greek metaphysical philosophy. He describes the Logos as God's firstborn, the mediator of creation, and the instrument of divine governance (Philo, *On the Confusion of Tongues*, 146 - 147).

While Philo firmly affirms the oneness of God, his Logos theology introduces a mediating metaphysical entity between God and the world. Runia (1993) and Winston (1985) show that Philo's Logos functions as an abstract intermediary hypostasis, influenced by Platonic metaphysics and Middle Platonic thought.

This model diverges from a strict Torah defined monotheism by relocating many creative and cognitive functions into a mediating principle, rather than attributing them directly to God's immediate activity. Philo thus exemplifies an elite intellectual strand of Jewish intermediary theology that develops alongside, and partly outside, emerging rabbinic tradition.

Mystical Ascent and Heavenly Visionary Traditions

Second Temple writings frequently depict visionary journeys to the heavens. Chief among these is Enoch's ascent in 1 Enoch 14, where he is guided through multiple heavenly realms. There he "saw the Temple" and the Most High enthroned in glory. Following this ascent, Enoch is transformed into an ethereal, exalted figure who serves as a heavenly scribe and stands near the Divine Presence.

Other texts also portray prophets and patriarchs in the heavenly court. Daniel's vision of the Ancient of Days (Dan 7) depicts God enthroned amid a cosmic courtroom, with books of judgment opened and a human-like figure presented before the throne. Although not narrated as a step-by-step ascent, this vision shares the throne chariot and tribunal imagery that later becomes central in Jewish mystical traditions.

Within mystical and priestly strands of literature, these accounts offered hope and legitimacy to believers. Enoch's journey establishes a heavenly archetype for Israel's sanctuary and rituals: the earthly temple is portrayed as a replica of the eternal one where angels continually serve God. Walsh suggests that the revelation of the heavenly temple would have been "of inestimable value" to the faithful, assuring them that despite earthly trials the true divine order persists in heaven.

Similarly, the Qumran community's liturgy in the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice likely functioned as a collective mystical ascent: the congregation on earth ritually synchronises its worship with that of the angels. In essence, these writings propose that holy vision, whether individual (Enoch) or communal (Qumran liturgy), links Israel to the celestial realm.

Taken together, Second Temple mystical traditions depict a close cosmic parallelism: earth reflects heaven. Many Jews believed that "earthly realities reflect and mirror heavenly ones", so that Israel, the holy congregation on earth, corresponds to the angelic "holy ones" in heaven. This "mystical anthropology" implies that devout Jews, in worship and moral conduct, share in an angelic identity. Yet crucially, none of these texts replaces Yahweh with another deity. Angels are powerful and exalted, but they are consistently portrayed as created servants of God, not as independent gods.

Angels and Absolute Monotheism: Continuity and Tension

The question then arises: how do these angelic and visionary traditions relate to the absolute monotheism of the Mosaic law The Torah emphatically declares Yahweh's uniqueness: "You have been shown to know that YHWH is God; there is no other besides him" (Deut 4:35), and "Hear, O Israel: YHWH our God, YHWH is one" (Deut 6:4). The Ten Commandments forbid worship of any other deity (Exod 20:3).

On the surface, venerating or petitioning angels might appear to risk either polytheism or idolatry.

Scholars differ in their interpretation of this tension. Some, such as Michael Heiser, argue that Second Temple Judaism implicitly retained a form of divine council theology. Heiser notes that many late Jewish texts refer to "other gods" and that some authors even speak of a "second power in heaven". In his view, passages like Deuteronomy 4:35 can be read as monolatrous claims, emphasising exclusive worship of one God without absolutely denying the existence of other spiritual beings. From that perspective, the sharp monotheistic language of Deuteronomy reflects a redactional agenda, whereas the broader Second Temple world view still envisages a heavenly king surrounded by subordinate divine beings.

Others emphasise continuity with Torah. Jonathan Ben Dov notes that references to angels and "sons of God" are common in the Hebrew Bible (for example, Psalms 29, 89; Job 1:6) and argues that ancient Israelite monotheism focused on Yahweh's uniqueness rather than on abstract metaphysical exclusivity. In his words, belief in multiple divine figures "does not really contradict monotheism", since the defining feature of Israelite faith is Yahweh's incomparable status.

From this angle, angels are real but completely subordinate. Enoch may ascend into heaven and see the Lord's throne, yet he remains a created being. Even when Judaic texts name archangels or heavenly princes, they carefully maintain that only YHWH is God. In Jubilees, for instance, angels perform the divine will but never demand worship; Israel is sanctified "in front of" the angels as God's chosen people.

In practice, most scholars conclude that Second Temple angelology did not overthrow monotheism in the biblical sense, even if it expanded its conceptual vocabulary. Angels function as intermediaries and messengers, not as rival deities. In Daniel 10, the angelic messenger acknowledges God's absolute supremacy and describes Michael's role as helper (Dan 10:13), implying that neither Michael nor the other princes challenge God's rule. In 1 Enoch, angels are sharply distinguished from God by Enoch's constant awe before the "Great Glory", not before the angels themselves. The Jewish Encyclopedia later notes that by the rabbinic period the very idea of a "second God" had become taboo, and rabbinic teaching often stressed the status of angels as mere messengers to counter any suggestion of dualism.

Thus, although angelic liturgy and heavenly ascents might superficially resemble polytheistic patterns, Jewish authors repeatedly frame them within a rigorous Yahweh centred theology. Angels owe their existence and power entirely to God. As Ben Dov observes, the distinctiveness of Israelite religion lies in Yahweh's incomparability and freedom from natural forces and images, not necessarily in an abstract denial of all

other spiritual beings. Second Temple angelology introduces layers of intermediary figures, but these are understood as servants of God. The absolute monotheism of Exodus and Deuteronomy remains intact in principle: God alone is creator and ruler, while angels and mystics act only at God's command.

Key developments of this era include:

- **Expanded angelic hierarchies:** Texts such as 1 Enoch enumerate seven archangels (for example Uriel, Raguel, Michael). Jewish apocalypticism populates heaven with a structured celestial court, yet preserves a single sovereign God above them.
- **Angelic intermediaries:** Many writings feature angels acting as agents of revelation and judgment. The Angel of the Presence in Jubilees dictates the law (Jub 1 - 2), and Gabriel in Daniel delivers and interprets visions (Dan 8 - 9), modelling divine revelation mediated through angels.
- **Mystical ascents:** Visionary journeys recur (Enoch, Levi and others), depicting the structure of heaven and the throne of God. Enoch's ascent in 1 Enoch 14 and Daniel's throne vision in Daniel 7 become foundational for later Jewish mystical traditions.
- **Heavenly worship:** Works such as the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice imagine coordinated worship by angels, with earthly worship understood as an echo or participation in that heavenly liturgy.
- **Israel - angel correspondence:** Numerous texts imply a direct link between Israel and the angels. Qumran sectarians call themselves "holy ones" who join the heavenly host in serving God, thereby reinforcing Israel's priestly role under angelic auspices.

In scholarly debate, some regard these developments as evidence that practical monotheism became looser, while others interpret them as a sophisticated way of honouring God through an entourage of obedient agents. What is clear is that Second Temple Judaism became theologically richer, incorporating angelic and mystical concepts into its understanding of God's governance of the world. All such developments are framed so that Yahweh's exclusive supremacy remains the fundamental axiom: angels may shine brilliantly, but only God shines eternally and uniquely in the heavenly temple.

Persian Dualism and the Expansion of Jewish Angelology

The Babylonian exile and subsequent Persian rule introduced theological concepts that helped reshape post exilic Jewish cosmology. Zoroastrian religious structures

featured elaborate angel hierarchies, a pronounced cosmic moral dualism, and developed eschatological schemes. These motifs appear with new clarity in post exilic Jewish texts.

Collins (1997) and Boyce (2001) show that Second Temple Jewish literature exhibits a dualistic worldview largely absent from pre exilic Israelite religion. The emergence of named archangels such as Michael, Gabriel and Raphael, each assigned distinct cosmic functions, parallels the Zoroastrian system of *yazatas* (venerated spiritual beings). Likewise, the figure of Satan develops from a prosecutorial agent in the prologue of Job into a near cosmic antagonist in later Second Temple writings.

Albertz (1994) argues that this transformation reflects Persian ideological influence more than internal development from Torah traditions. According to this analysis, the reshaping of spiritual cosmology expanded intermediary hierarchies beyond earlier Israelite conceptions and, in practice, diluted the Torah defined model of direct divine sovereignty, in which God alone is the immediate source of action and judgment.

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- **The Hebrew Bible (Tanakh).**
  Canonical Jewish scriptures, especially Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, provide the Mosaic laws and foundational monotheistic pronouncements (for example, Exod 20:3 "no other gods" and Deut 6:4 "YHWH is one"). These texts supply the baseline against which Second Temple developments are contrasted. Prophetic and poetic books (for example, Psalms, Job) also include references to divine assemblies and "sons of God" that later interpreters associated with angels.

- **1 Enoch (Ethiopic Book of Enoch).**
  A collection of Jewish apocalyptic writings (third to first centuries BCE), originally composed in Aramaic and preserved mainly in Geez. The Book of Watchers (1 Enoch 1 - 36) and subsequent sections describe Enoch's heavenly journeys, the rebellion of the Watchers, and detailed angelic hierarchies. Archangels such as Michael, Raphael and Uriel are named, and Enoch is portrayed as a heavenly scribe. These materials are central for understanding early Jewish views of celestial worship and angelic mediation.

- **2 Enoch (Slavonic Enoch).**
  A Jewish pseudepigraphon (first century CE) that recounts Enoch's ascent through multiple heavens and his investiture as a glorified, angel like figure. Although not cited in detail above, it elaborates the theme of human exaltation into the divine realm and stands alongside 1 Enoch in illustrating mystical ascent in late Judaism.

- **Book of Jubilees.**
  A rewritten version of Genesis and Exodus (second century BCE) that emphasises covenant, law and calendar. Jubilees portrays Moses receiving the Torah from the Angel of the Presence and constantly depicts angels as guardians of creation and revelation. Van Ruiten's analysis of this text

underlines the prominence of angelic mediation and the relative withdrawal of direct divine speech.

- **Book of Daniel.**
  A canonical apocalypse (second century BCE) in Hebrew and Aramaic that contains narratives and visions (Dan 7 - 12) with strong angelic motifs. Michael appears as "one of the chief princes" and deliverer of Israel, and Gabriel interprets visions. Daniel's angelology is a key witness for the concept of national patron angels and cosmic conflict reflected in human history.

- **Dead Sea Scrolls (Qumran texts).**
  Sectarian manuscripts from the third century BCE to the first century CE. Important texts for this study include the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice (4Q400 - 404) and the Aramaic Levi Document (4Q213). The Sabbath Songs present a shared liturgy of angels and humans in a heavenly temple, while the Levi text portrays Levi's vision of angelic priests. These works illustrate Qumran's strong identification with the angelic host and its view of Israel's priesthood as having a heavenly counterpart.

- **Jonathan Ben Dov (2018).**
  "Are There Gods, Angels, and Demons in Deuteronomy" (TheTorah.com) analyses biblical verses on heavenly beings. Ben Dov argues that ancient Israelite monotheism is defined by Yahweh's unique status, not by a denial of the existence of other spiritual entities. This article provides the conceptual framework for understanding how angels and other beings can be acknowledged without undermining monotheism.

- **Matthew L. Walsh (2019).**
  "Claiming Israel's Angels as Their Own" examines Second Temple and Qumran texts to show how the sectarians appropriated Israel's angels as part of their own identity. Walsh details Daniel's portrayal of Michael and 1 Enoch's angelic temple and discusses Qumran's claim to be the true community of "holy ones". His work is used here to support the description of angelic protection, heavenly cult, and Israel - angel correspondence.

- **Jacques van Ruiten (2007).**
  "Angels and Demons in the Book of Jubilees" investigates Jubilees' angelology, especially the role of the Angel of the Presence. Van Ruiten argues that the prominence of this angel reflects a theological move toward mediated revelation, in which God increasingly acts and speaks through intermediaries. This supports the argument that Second Temple literature often restructures revelation around angelic agents.

- **The Jewish Encyclopedia (Angelology).**
  Blau and Kohler's early twentieth century entry surveys Jewish beliefs about angels from biblical through rabbinic times. It provides convenient summaries of the main angelic figures and traditions, including archangel lists and Enoch's later identification with Metatron. Although dated in some respects, it remains useful as a historical overview of Jewish angelology.

- **Michael S. Heiser (2004).**
  The doctoral dissertation on the divine council in late canonical and non canonical Second Temple texts argues that many Jewish writings preserved a divine council concept, including a "second power in heaven". Heiser's work is cited in relation to views that interpret Israelite monotheism as monolatrous and compatible with a populated heavenly court.

- **D. T. Runia (1993) and David Winston (1985).**
  Runia's and Winston's studies of Philo of Alexandria examine how Philo's concept of the Logos and his mystical theology integrate Greek philosophical categories with Jewish monotheism. Their analyses inform the discussion of Philo's intermediary Logos as a hypostasis situated between God and creation.

- **Mary Boyce (2001).**
  Boyce's survey of Zoroastrianism is used for background on Persian religious beliefs, particularly angelic hierarchies and dualism. Her work supports the argument that Persian religious structures influenced the expansion of Jewish angelology and dualistic motifs in the post exilic period.

Part VII: The Rise of Rabbinic Authority - Obedience to Rabbis Over Torah

The destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE marked a watershed in Jewish religious life. Temple centred sacrifice was no longer possible, and new forms of authority and practice emerged around the interpretation of the Torah. In this period, the Pharisaic tradition crystallised into Rabbinic Judaism, centred on Torah study and halakhic law. Rabbinic authority became the primary guide for Jewish life. Early rabbinic sources insist that this development did not abolish the written Torah's authority; rather, it established an interpretive framework to apply divine law to changing historical and social circumstances. The Mishnah and later the Talmuds emerged as the canonical vehicles for applying the Torah's commandments.

This section analyses how scriptural authority gave way in practice to rabbinic authority. It examines classic texts (Mishnah, Talmud, Midrash) that present rabbinic rulings as normative, sometimes even overruling a literal reading of the Torah, and it

explores theological notions such as Torah she-beal peh (the Oral Torah) and lo ba-shamayim hi ("not in heaven"), especially as epitomised by the Oven of Achnai episode (Bava Metzia 59b). It then considers scholarly perspectives (Neusner, Halbertal, Berkovits and others) on whether rabbinic halakhic innovation represents a true extension of divine law or a human interpolation. In particular, it asks whether elevating rabbinic Daat Torah (the authority of the Sages) risks placing human authority above God's, thereby altering the model of monotheistic obedience. Although a sensitive issue, it is essential for understanding post Temple Judaism and its claim to fidelity to the Sinai covenant.

From Torah to Sages: Shifting Authority After 70 CE

In the wake of the Temple's destruction, Jewish leadership shifted from priests and kings to Chazal (the rabbinic Sages). The Mishnah (c. 200 CE), compiled under Rabbi Judah HaNasi, institutionalised Oral Torah traditions in written form. Rabbinic sources emphasise that Scripture remained paramount: the Mishnah did not abolish Scripture but assumed its absolute authority and sought to interpret, apply, and "fence" it.

The new rabbinic laws and commentaries were therefore justified not as replacements, but as extensions and safeguards of the divine Torah. As modern commentators note, early rabbis took Scripture's authority for granted while developing a parallel corpus of legal interpretation. In practice, however, rabbinic enactments (takkanot) and traditions soon defined the details of daily life, often going beyond the literal wording of the Torah.

The codification of the Oral Law was itself framed as part of a divine plan. Rabbinic tradition maintains that Moses received two Torahs at Sinai: the written Torah she-be-khtav and the oral Torah she-beal peh, which he transmitted through successive generations. This theology undergirds rabbinic claims to authority. If both written and oral elements are God given, then the Sages, as transmitters and authorised expounders of the Oral Torah, are in effect executing divine will. Pharisaic leaders of the post Temple era explicitly proclaimed that their halakhah was "equally Sinaitic in origin as the original Torah".

By presenting their enactments as Sinaitic, they treated rabbinic law as theologically co equal with the text of Moses. As Daniel Elazar observes, this was an "outstanding achievement of constitutional reform": the Pharisaic Sages effectively rewrote Israel's "constitution" by endorsing the divine origin of the Oral Law. In rabbinic ideology, obedience to the Sages was therefore obedience to God's law, even where it required superseding or extending what the written Torah explicitly states.

Key Rabbinic Paradigms: Law and Majority Rule

The transition to rabbinic authority is exemplified by several Talmudic narratives and aphorisms. Central among these is the maxim lo ba-shamayim hi, "It [the Torah] is not in heaven" (Deut 30:12). The rabbis applied this verse to argue that, after Sinai, human interpretation of Torah norms takes precedence over heavenly intervention.

In the famous Oven of Achnai story (Bava Metzia 59b), Rabbi Eliezer and the Sages dispute the impurity status of a reassembled clay oven. Rabbi Eliezer's view is supported by miraculous signs and even by a heavenly voice (bat qol) that declares, "The halakhah is in accordance with him." Rabbi Joshua responds by citing lo ba-shamayim hi (Deut 30:12) and Exodus 23:2 ("after the majority one must incline"), insisting that earthly majority rule decides the law. God is then depicted as smiling and saying, "My children have defeated Me." The narrative encapsulates a core rabbinic principle: once the Torah has been given, final legal authority rests with the duly constituted human court rather than with ongoing prophecy or miracles.

This principle is built into rabbinic theology. The lesson of Bava Metzia 59b is codified by later authorities. Maimonides, in the Mishneh Torah, famously interprets lo ba-shamayim hi to mean that "henceforth no prophet is authorised to innovate anything" beyond what is decided by the majority court. Modern Orthodox thinkers such as Berkovits echo this stance: "No written word can deal in advance with the innumerable situations [of history]…

The eternal word of the Torah required a time related teaching… tradition passed on by the living word from generation to generation, the Torah shebaal peh." In this view, halakhah is a dynamic, living realisation of Torah, not a static code. Once the Torah was declared complete, God bound Himself, so to speak, to the judicial process He had prescribed. Moses' final authority and God's word were considered fully transmitted at Sinai; thereafter, human judgment, exercised by authoritative rabbis, became normative.

Rabbinic Enactments Over the Plain Text

Rabbinic law sometimes appears to directly contravene a literal Torah command, under explicit justification. The Talmud discusses cases where the Sages claim the power "to uproot a Torah law". One example concerns positive commandments that the rabbis suspend to prevent transgression. Thus, they prohibited carrying the lulav or blowing the shofar on Shabbat, even where these acts coincide with biblical festivals, due to the practical concern that someone might carry the object in the public domain to consult an expert. The Gemara explains that such "sit and do nothing" rulings are binding "even though by Torah law these mitzvot apply", and that people must obey the Sages. The authority for this is traced to Deuteronomy's

injunction, "you shall do according to the tenor of the sentence which they shall declare to you… you shall not turn aside… to the right or to the left" (Deut 17:10–11). Rashba (c. 1300) summarises the logic: "The Sages of Israel are like their Father in heaven… a court can lay down a stipulation to uproot a Torah law, and they relied on… 'according to all that they shall teach you'."

Talmudic examples are numerous. Hillel's prozbul effectively neutralises the Torah's sabbatical debt release, and other enactments allow legally "consecrated" property to be treated as profane in order to override Torah penalties in specific circumstances. The Mishnah records takkanot such as requiring a father to divorce his unchaste daughter, instituting additional festivals, or modifying ritual practice; all of these have full legal force. In short, rabbinic courts treated their decrees as binding even when they confronted the straightforward sense of the written text, provided they operated within what they saw as the procedural limits set at Sinai. This demonstrates clearly that, within Rabbinic Judaism, the locus of practical obedience shifted from the literal wording of the Torah to deference to the authorised rabbinic court.

The rabbis, however, did not view themselves as inventing law ex nihilo. They understood their legislative acts as either latent within the Torah or explicitly authorised by it. The doctrine distinguishing deoraita (Torah law) from derabbanan (rabbinic law) holds Torah law as supreme but recognises rabbinic law as fully valid, though more flexible. Many rabbis cited biblical precedents for law making and saw themselves as enacting "ordinances of the time" (takkanot ha-shaah) that the Torah anticipated in principle. Deuteronomy 17:11 ("according to all that they shall teach you") was read as God's instruction to obey judicial rulings, giving those rulings divine backing even when they go beyond the plain text. In halakhic literature, rabbinic rulings are frequently presented as if they too were commanded by the Torah, rather than as merely human decrees.

Torah she-beal Peh and Divine Communication

The idea of an Oral Torah given at Sinai is itself a theological construct designed to bridge written Scripture and rabbinic law. Rabbi Eliezer Berkovits describes the "time related teaching" of halakhah, the Oral Torah, as something passed on by the living word in each generation. In many Midrashic and Talmudic passages, the Sages insist that particular laws, even those first articulated by later rabbis, ultimately derive from Moses. A well-known baraita in Menachot 29b relates that Moses ascends and sees Rabbi Akiva expounding fine points of law in a future generation; when Moses is told that these rulings are "a halakhah transmitted to Moses from Sinai", he is comforted. Symbolically, every new halakhic ruling is retrojected into Sinai's revelation, reinforcing its divine legitimacy and, in rabbinic thinking, preserving monotheism.

At the same time, the rabbinic sources themselves show an awareness of tension in this claim. As Yosef Lindell notes, the Sages held divergent views: some maintained that Moses literally received everything, including later discussions, whereas others suggested that only general principles were transmitted and later applied by human reason. Crucially, they also taught that the process of revelation ended at Sinai: once the Torah was given, "it was entirely in human hands, and prophetic inquiry is forbidden". Law thereafter is reconstructed through human reasoning, not through new prophecy. Lindell emphasises that, in this model, "only the majority rule of the court of law has standing" in determining halakhah.

The rabbinic system therefore maintains monotheism by asserting that God pre-ordained the mechanism for ongoing law. After Sinai, there are no new direct communications of law: God's will is mediated through the Torah and its authorised interpreters. The Oven of Achnai story dramatises this principle. Even a heavenly voice cannot overturn the meta law that "the Torah is not in heaven". Obedience to a rabbinic court is thus framed as obedience to God's final decree, namely the command that legal disputes be resolved by the majority decision of the judges. In halakhic discourse, the rabbis explicitly associate their authority with this prior divine enactment: God appointed judges at Sinai whose decisions "one must do". For Rabbinic Judaism, the chain of revelation ends with the Torah and its Oral dimension, and later rulings are regarded as encompassed within that initial gift.

The Oven of Achnai and "Not in Heaven"

The Oven of Achnai narrative (Bava Metzia 59b) represents the peak expression of this theology. No explicit scriptural text settles the oven's status, and Rabbi Eliezer's eloquence, signs, and miracles fail to persuade his colleagues. When the bat qol affirms Rabbi Eliezer's minority view, Rabbi Joshua responds that "The Torah has already been given at Sinai" and that the community must follow "after the majority". God's declaration, "My children have defeated Me", underscores that the Sages are understood as God's intended legal agents.

This episode raises a sharp theological question: does it depict humanity as overriding God? Some later Jewish thinkers, such as Rav Kook and Isaac Abarbanel, interpret the divine "laughter" in a spiritual or metaphorical way. Daniel J. Harrington and other academic scholars view the passage as expressing a paradigm shift: law becomes a fundamentally human endeavour once revelation is complete. In the story, halakhic validity flows from proper procedure rather than from miraculous signs. The narrative symbolises the end of an era of direct intervention in law and affirms that God Himself endorses this system. God's apparent "defeat" signals His will that Torah should live through human debate rather than through ongoing heavenly instruction.

Academically, this principle is not treated as an oddity but as a foundation of rabbinic legal theory. The Talmud (Sanhedrin 11a) and codifiers such as Maimonides cite lo ba-shamayim hi as proof that, once the Torah has been given, no prophecy may overrule the decisions of a duly constituted court. Rabbinic texts even praise this rule as expressing divine humility in entrusting law to "His children". The Oven of Achnai story therefore has deep programmatic status: it both entrenches rabbinic authority over scriptural literalism and presents that authority as divinely sanctioned. Theologically, the rabbis understood this as reconciling human agency with monotheism. The divine law is absolute, but its living interpretation is bound to the system of human jurisprudence God Himself instituted.

Rabbinic Authority: Substitute or Complement to Divine Law?

The inevitable question is whether this empowerment of human Sages ever substituted for, or competed with, divine law. Critics, including Karaite Jews and some Christian polemicists, have accused Rabbinic Judaism of "elevating man to God". From a purely textual standpoint, phrases such as "the Sages are like their Father in heaven" can seem to blur the line between divine and human authority, as rabbinic leaders are described as God's stewards or representatives.

The rabbis themselves, however, never claimed to invent new theology or additional gods. Their constant affirmation was that they were following God's Torah, albeit through human methods. Berkovits stresses that halakhah, including the Oral Torah, is "the wisdom of the application of the written word… Its implementation cannot be contained in any book". The gap between a fixed text and changing reality, in his view, necessitates human agency, which God provided for in the Sinai covenant. Rabbinic authority, therefore, is not seen as conflicting with monotheism but as the very means by which monotheistic law remains workable in history.

Modern scholars generally concur that rabbinic halakhah is best understood as a continuation of Torah rather than a departure from it. Neusner, for example, notes that the rabbis consistently upheld the primacy of the Torah, and Halbertal argues that the halakhic process itself is a form of divine law prescribed at Sinai. The doctrine of Torah she-beal peh explicitly claims divine origin for the Oral Torah. Alternative Jewish movements, such as the Sadducees and later the Karaites, rejected the Oral Law, but mainstream Rabbinic Judaism treated it as integral to God's plan.

Where tensions become visible, such as when a rabbinic ruling appears to nullify a biblical command, rabbinic theology offers reconciliation. Rabbis distinguish between the spirit and the letter of the Torah and argue that human leaders must guide people toward God's true intent. This sometimes requires creating safeguards (gezerot) or dispensations (heterim) that override the plain wording of a command to prevent

greater violations. Rabbinic commentary frequently frames these moves as preserving the fulfilment of the Torah (nikuy ha-mitzvah) rather than contradicting God's will. Deuteronomy 17:11 ("do not turn aside to the right or to the left") is interpreted as a mandate to follow the court's judgment, even when it seems to diverge from the text.

In summary, Rabbinic Judaism teaches that obedience to the Sages is itself obedience to God. The apparent paradox is resolved by the belief that God deliberately chose this human mechanism. The Sages are not rivals to God but divinely endorsed agents of His law. Without their interpretive work, the rabbis would argue, the Torah could not function as Torah, because the world continually changes. Monotheism, on this view, remains intact: there is one lawgiver who granted a comprehensive Torah, written and oral, together with a process for its application.

Academic Perspectives

Scholarship in Jewish studies largely supports this view of continuity. Berkovits explicitly affirms that the Oral Torah was a divine necessity for Israel's survival. Jacob Neusner's extensive studies (for example, The Oral Torah: An Introduction, 1985) portray rabbinic halakhah as preserving Mosaic law through dialectic and application rather than negating it. Moshe Halbertal, in People of the Book (1997), similarly argues that law in Rabbinic Judaism is not a mere social construct but an unfolding of God's will, and that rabbinic legislation is rooted in the Sinaitic covenant. These scholars acknowledge that rabbinic methods extend beyond the letter of Scripture, yet they conclude that this does not constitute a break from monotheism. Instead, the halakhic process is interpreted as the fulfilment of a covenantal command within monotheism: the command to obey the judges God has appointed.

At the same time, some modern Jewish thinkers express unease. Midrashic narratives and playful uses of gematria occasionally suggest that, in saying "My children have defeated Me", God symbolically relinquished direct control of Jewish law to human interpreters. Such images raise profound questions about divine sovereignty. Modern scholarship generally interprets the narrative differently, as an affirmation of God's trust in Israel's legal process rather than a diminution of God's status. The divine "laughter" is a sign of approval of Israel's maturity, not a literal abdication of rule.

On the specific question of deviation from "absolute monotheism", most contemporary academics conclude that rabbinic halakhah stayed within a strictly monotheistic framework. The rabbis never envisaged multiple deities or a divine human duality. They affirmed that only one God exists and that He established both written and oral Torah. Their expansion of law was consistently justified through monotheistic texts and principles. Rabbinic Judaism therefore describes itself not as a human religion independent of Torah, but as Torah realised.

Nonetheless, in political and social terms, rabbinic authority did effectively replace earlier divine institutions. In practice, communities obeyed the decisions of rabbinic courts above what any individual might deduce from the biblical text alone. The shift was so significant that even God's own authority in legal matters is portrayed as operating through the rabbinic system, as seen in the Oven of Achnai story. From an external perspective, this may seem to depict humans as ruling over God's law. From within rabbinic thought, however, it means that human legal processes are the very form in which divine law manifests in the present age.

Comparative Analysis: Torah Authority vs Rabbinic Authority

The transformation of authority from the written Torah to an expanded rabbinic legal system represents one of the most profound structural developments in post Temple Judaism. While rabbinic tradition presents this development as a continuation of Mosaic authority through oral transmission, close reading reveals significant tension between Torah defined authority and post Temple rabbinic jurisprudence.

The Torah explicitly prohibits any addition to, or subtraction from, divine law: "You shall not add to the word which I command you, nor take from it" (Deut 4:2). Nevertheless, post Temple Rabbinic Judaism institutionalised takkanot, gezerot and minhagim as binding legal norms, often extending or modifying biblical law (Neusner, 2001). Deuteronomy 17:8–13 establishes judicial authority for priestly courts operating within the Temple system. After 70 CE, however, rabbinic authorities transferred this judicial function to post Temple academies without prophetic or priestly restoration. Halbertal (1997) argues that this shift effectively relocated interpretive sovereignty from direct divine enactment to scholarly consensus.

In addition, classical prophecy ceases after the early Second Temple period, yet the Oral Torah expands dramatically in scope through the Mishnah, Tosefta and Talmud. This creates a structural tension between prophetic revelation and juristic creativity. Where Torah authority is rooted in direct divine command, rabbinic authority is grounded in interpretive lineage and institutional continuity.

This contrast can be summarised as follows:

a) Torah Principle: Deut 4:2 - no addition or subtraction
   Rabbinic Development: Introduction of binding takkanot and gezerot
b) Torah Principle: Deut 17 - Temple based priestly court
   Rabbinic Development: Post Temple rabbinic courts and academies
c) Torah Principle: Cessation of prophecy
   Rabbinic Development: Expansion of the Oral Law corpus
d) Torah Principle: Direct divine revelation
   Rabbinic Development: Scholarly majority rule as final legal authority

Taken together, these developments constitute a profound relocation of practical authority within Judaism, from the immediate institutions envisaged in the Torah to the rabbinic institutions that governed Jewish life after the destruction of the Temple.

Conclusion

The post Temple era saw the rabbis ascend as Israel's religious leaders. They anchored their authority in the belief that God had entrusted them with both the written and the oral Torah. In the Mishnah and Talmud, rabbinic enactments and interpretations are repeatedly presented as binding on a level comparable with, and sometimes functionally above, the literal text of Scripture. Concepts such as Torah she-beal peh and lo ba-shamayim hi function as theological linchpins: the former ensures continuity with Sinai, while the latter ensures that jurisprudence belongs, by divine design, to the community and its authorised courts.

When examined critically, rabbinic halakhic development does not, in rabbinic self-understanding, imply any departure from monotheism. The rabbis consistently framed their laws as extensions of God's will, mandated at Sinai for later application. The real debate concerns whether this conception sufficiently safeguards the unique authority of the written Law. Many historians and theologians argue that, within the rabbinic view, it does. Human Sages are not independent legislatures but guardians of God's eternal law, acting under divine commission. Obedience to the Torah therefore still means obedience to God, even if the locus of concrete decision making is human.

In academic terms, rabbinic authority did not replace divine law in a way that made God's law optional. Rather, it elaborated and operationalised that law. Halakhah envisions one Torah, dual in form (written and oral), and one God. When the Oral Torah and its rulings are properly understood as part of that single divine Torah, Jewish monotheism is not eroded but expressed through a living, interpretive tradition that began with Moses and continues to function in each era.

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Ariel, D. S. (1995). *What do Jews believe? The spiritual foundations of Judaism*. Ariel surveys core Jewish beliefs and includes a discussion of the Oven of Achnai (Bava Metzia 59b). His treatment provides a clear, accessible account of the story and its theological message that, after Sinai, prophetic miracles have no legal standing and majority rule prevails. Although not a technical monograph, the work effectively illustrates how midrashic narratives encode rabbinic legal philosophy.

Berkovits, E. (1983). *Not in heaven: The nature and function of Halakhah*. This major Modern Orthodox study of Jewish law argues that halakhah is a living, evolving tradition rather than a static scriptural code. Berkovits contends that no written text can anticipate all future circumstances and that God therefore provided an Oral Torah "passed on by the living word". His analysis strongly supports the view that rabbinic law is divinely mandated and explains the necessity of ongoing human legislation within a monotheistic framework.

Christian Publishing House. (2025). The destruction of the Second Temple and the rise of Rabbinic Judaism. This online article from the Updated American Standard Version site presents a Christian perspective on early Rabbinic Judaism. It affirms that the Mishnah upheld Scripture's authority while establishing a fixed corpus of Jewish law, and it notes that rabbis assumed scriptural primacy even as they created new legal forms. Although not peer reviewed, the piece succinctly summarises the historical shift to rabbinic authority after 70 CE and is useful for contextual background.

Elazar, D. J. (n.d.). Deuteronomy as Israel's ancient constitution: Some preliminary reflections. Elazar's article, written from a political science perspective, treats Deuteronomy as Israel's foundational "constitution". Of particular relevance is his observation that, under the Anshei Knesset HaGedolah, the Mishnah and rabbinic law came to be regarded as "equally Sinaitic in origin as the original Torah". This helps explain how early rabbis ideologically framed their Oral Law as having full divine sanction, thereby legitimising rabbinic authority.

Lindell, Y. (2022). Divinity and humanity: What the Jewish sages thought about the Oral Torah. In this online essay, Lindell surveys Talmudic opinions about the authority and origin of the Oral Torah. He highlights that the Sages did not hold a single uniform view, but often taught that, after Sinai, "it was entirely in human hands" and that prophetic inquiry into law is forbidden. His discussion of Menachot 29b (Moses and Rabbi Akiva) and lo ba-shamayim hi underscores the themes of rabbinic agency, divine grant of authority, and the shift from prophetic to juristic modes of decision making.

Rimon, Y. Z. (2015). Changes in Halakha not by way of midrashic exposition during the period of Chazal. Rimon's chapter in an Introduction to Talmud examines how the Sages exercised legislative authority beyond midrashic derivation. He cites passages in the Gemara that allow a court to "uproot a Torah law" through passive decrees and shows how they justified this via Deuteronomy 17:10–11. Although not a peer reviewed academic monograph, the study provides detailed textual evidence of how rabbinic authorities understood their power to modify biblical commandments and is therefore valuable for analysing the structure of rabbinic legal theory.

Part VIII: Jewish Mysticism (Merkavah, Hekhalot, Proto-Kabbalah, Ascents) and Monotheism

Merkavah (Chariot) Mysticism and Hekhalot Literature:
Early Jewish mysticism (approximately 2nd century BCE to 10th century CE) centred on visions of the divine throne (Merkavah) and ascents into heaven. Scholem describes this as "throne mysticism": the mystics' goal was not to speculate on God's essence but to perceive God's appearance on the heavenly throne. The foundational texts (often pseudepigraphic) include Maaseh Merkavah ("Work of the Chariot") and the Hekhalot ("Palaces") corpus, which recounts Rabbi Akiva, Rabbi Ishmael, and other Tannaitic figures undertaking ecstatic journeys through seven heavenly palaces using secret names and hymns. These writings emphasise preparatory rituals, purification, and mystical passwords to overcome angelic guardians. The tradition was highly esoteric and was taught only to select adepts; unauthorised discussion was warned to be perilous.

Proto-Kabbalistic and Magical Elements:

In late antiquity and the early medieval period, Jewish mysticism incorporated proto-Kabbalistic ideas and practical magic. For example, Sefer Yetzirah (3rd to 6th centuries CE) and the lost Maaseh Bereshit describe creation through ten divine sefirot or emanations. Although these early texts do not attach later theosophical meanings to the sefirot, they foreshadow medieval Kabbalah. Aggadah and later mystical works also integrate "practical Kabbalah": the use of divine names and incantations for spiritual ascent or protection.

Medieval lists of magical lore (including Sefer Raziel HaMalakh, amulets, and golem creation) are rooted in this earlier milieu. A strand of mysticism also developed a sustained concern for cosmic letters and names: one tradition emphasises the Hebrew alphabet and ten emanations as keys to creation. These elements show continuity from Talmudic-era "secrets" to full Kabbalistic systems.

- Example mystical motifs: Merkavah and Hekhalot literature focus on visionary ascent (ladders, chariots, palaces) to access the divine council. Proto-Kabbalistic texts enumerate sefirot or emanations as ancient forebears of the ten sephirot. Ritual magic (incantations, angelic names) features prominently, blending apocalyptic and folk motifs.

Angels and Patriarchs Elevated:

A striking feature of Jewish mysticism is the elevation of human figures to heavenly status. In 3 Enoch, Enoch (the biblical great-grandfather of Noah) undergoes an ascension and is transformed into the angel Metatron. Scholem notes that he is described as being "placed on a throne next to the throne of glory", effectively serving as a celestial counterpart or vice-regent. Other traditions likewise depict patriarchs enthroned. For example, a Second Temple tale (the Exagoge of Ezekiel the Tragedian) has Moses ascend Sinai and be offered God's throne.

The Dead Sea Scroll 4Q491 similarly reports a visionary who, upon ascending, "received the mighty throne in the congregation of the gods". Such narratives verge on apotheosis: humans (or their spiritual forms) are granted divine privilege or jurisdiction. Even Elijah's career in rabbinic legend (ending in heaven) hints at similar themes, although he is not explicitly made divine. These motifs link Merkavah mysticism to earlier apocalyptic and even non-Jewish ideas of human exaltation.

- Elevation of patriarchs: Chief examples include Enoch or Metatron and Moses. In Hekhalot lore, Enoch is enthroned as an archangel. In rabbinic and pseudepigraphal stories, Moses sits on a heavenly throne for a day, offered by God. These tales illustrate how mystical texts sometimes confer semi-divine status on revered figures.
- Jewish mystics attempted to define boundaries preventing intermediary figures from becoming objects of worship, but textual evidence shows that these boundaries were frequently crossed in practice. Rituals invoking angels or patriarchs for protection or revelation demonstrate the functional elevation of intermediaries beyond metaphor.

Monotheism and Mysticism: A Torah-Based Critique:

These mystical practices raised concerns about maintaining strict Torah-defined monotheism. The Hebrew Scriptures command, "You shall have no other gods before Me" (Exodus 20:3) and proclaim Israel's God as the sole Lord of history and creator of heaven and earth. Critics argue that picturing multiple heavenly agents or hypostatised emanations risks blurring God's unity. Moses Maimonides (12th century) epitomised the rationalist view: he taught that ultimate reality contains only God (and the created natural order), leaving "no room for the multifarious denizens beloved of ancient Jewish mysticism".

In his analysis, Judaism "depopulated the heavens", rejecting any attempt to "repopulate" the divine realm with intermediaries. Speculative entities such as angels, sefirot, or heroic souls were to be understood metaphorically, not as literally divine. From this perspective, mystical sefirot are symbolic aspects or attributes of God, and enthroned angels like Metatron are not independent deities.

- Torah criteria of unity: According to Torah law, absolute monotheism is imperative. Any theology that implicitly attributes divinity to created beings is viewed with suspicion. Classical sources stress that intermediate beings (such as angels) have no independent kavod (glory) of their own; only God is truly radiant (for example, Shut Yerushalmi 2:13 cited in Kellner). Mystical symbols were tolerated only when carefully framed to avoid literal polytheism. In short, Torah monotheism demands that all exalted visions must ultimately reaffirm one God, a standard that even Kabbalists profess to uphold by presenting sefirot and angels as modes or manifestations of the One.
- Potential problems: When mystics treat patriarchs or angels as quasi-divine, critics point to prophecies such as Isaiah 45:5 to 6 ("I am the Lord, and there is no other"), warning that even subtle forms of polytheism (for example dividing

God into parts or hypostases) are forbidden. Tales of Enoch sitting "next to" God's throne or Moses adopting God's seat are thus viewed by some as approaching idolatry unless reinterpreted symbolically. Kabbalists respond that such narratives are allegorical or refer to spiritual states, not to a second God.

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  This encyclopaedia article summarises core Judaic beliefs, emphasising exclusive monotheism: Israel's God is the "sole Lord" and no other gods are recognised. It is useful for understanding the Torah's strict criteria for worship and supports the claim that any mystical system must ultimately affirm God's unique unity.

- Kellner, Menachem (2006). Maimonides' confrontation with mysticism.
  This scholarly study examines Maimonides' attitude toward mysticism. Kellner argues that Maimonides sought to "depopulate the heavens", rejecting belief in autonomous supernatural beings. He highlights Maimonidean criteria for theological acceptability, namely that God alone is truly substantive. This frames the critique of mystical practices that introduce intermediate powers. It is cited here for Maimonides' explicit opposition to hypostatising angels, segulot, or sefirot.

- Orlov, Andrei A. (2005). The Enoch-Metatron tradition: From Jewish apocalyptic to Jewish mysticism.
  This monograph traces how the antediluvian Enoch was transformed in Jewish literature from a human prophet into the archangel Metatron who shares in God's majesty. It covers texts from 2 Enoch through Hekhalot. The work

provides background on the Enoch–Metatron motif and the near-apotheosis of patriarchs, showing how elevation of Enoch fits into early mysticism. It is relevant for the discussion of patriarchs receiving divine-like honour.

- Schäfer, Peter (2010). The hidden and manifest God: Some major themes in early Jewish mysticism.
  Schäfer offers a thematic study of early Jewish mystical texts such as Hekhalot and Merkavah writings. He analyses motifs including heavenly palaces, divine visions, and mystical secrecy, and explains how these traditions were embedded in rabbinic culture. The book is useful for contextualising Merkavah mysticism and its concepts.

- Scholem, Gershom (1941). Major trends in Jewish mysticism.
  This foundational history of Jewish mysticism establishes the chronology and character of early mystical movements. Scholem introduces the idea that early rabbinic mysticism was essentially "throne mysticism". He provides descriptive terminology (throne, chariot) and historical framing that inform the overview of Merkavah and Hekhalot traditions used in this paper.

Part IX: Case Study – The Angel Metatron and Documented Jewish Near-Deification of an Intermediary

In Jewish mystical texts, Metatron (traditionally identified with the antediluvian Enoch) is granted extraordinary status. For example, the pseudo-epigraphic 3 Enoch (5th to 6th century CE) describes Enoch's transformation into Metatron, "a semi-divine figure, who sits on a celestial throne, shares the Lord's glory, and bears His name". In that narrative, God "called me the Lesser YHWH in the presence of His entire heavenly household" (3 Enoch 12:5), directly echoing Exodus 23:21 ("For My name is in him"). Hekhalot literature similarly endows Metatron with divine attributes: he wears a crown inscribed with the Tetragrammaton and serves as sar ha-panim ("Prince of the Divine Presence"), mediating God's presence. These passages attribute to Metatron the name and glory of God.

Unsurprisingly, such exaltation has led some scholars to call the imagery "a polytheistic corruption of the godhead". Others (such as Orlov and Miller) emphasise that terms like "Lesser YHWH" reflect a vice-regency, not an independent deity. Orlov argues that calling Metatron Nekhohah Yehovah ("Lesser YHWH") signals his role as God's representative, a "sublimation of his vice-regency into a second manifestation of the deity in the name YHWH". Similarly, Miller contends that these onomatological motifs serve a symbolic theology: in Hekhalot literature, "names of

Metatron" invoke God's presence, and the multiple angelic ranks that bear the divine name form a "sophisticated onomatology" rather than true polytheism.

- Primary texts: 3 Enoch explicitly describes Metatron's investiture. God fashions him a kingly crown with forty-nine radiant stones and "calls [him] the Lesser YHWH", insisting on the shared name. Other Hekhalot passages depict Metatron's garments and rituals inscribed with God's name (for example, his crown bears all the letters by which heaven and earth were created). As Kiel summarises, the mystical Enoch or Metatron is "referred to as the Lesser YHWH" and appears enthroned with divine light. In all these sources, Metatron is portrayed as extraordinary among angels, the chief angel or "voice" through whom God's presence is revealed. Crucially, however, even these texts leave God above all: Metatron is described as the instrument or embodiment of God's name, not a separate god.

- Rabbinic rebuttals: The Babylonian Talmud records that rabbis explicitly rejected any notion of a "second power in heaven". In Sanhedrin 38b, a heretic challenges Rav Idit: why does Exodus 24:1 say "Come up to the Lord" rather than "Come up to Me"? Rav Idit replies that it refers to ascending to Metatron, "whose name is like his Master's, as it is written 'For My name is in him'". When the heretic responds that "we should worship him", Rav Idit counters by citing the same verse: "Do not be rebellious against him", which he interprets as "do not replace Me with him".

  Any attempt to equate Metatron with God is explicitly forbidden. Likewise, in Chagigah 15a (and related passages) Elisha ben Abuyah sees Metatron enthroned and exclaims that there are "two powers in heaven". The Sages immediately have Metatron flogged to dramatise that his "authority" is not divine. These dialogues show the rabbis treating belief in Metatron as God as heresy. The Talmudic response is clear: Metatron may be exalted, but he remains a created angel, one "whose name is like [God's]"; any literal worship of him violates monotheism.

- Scholarly interpretation: Modern Jewish scholars generally conclude that these texts do not overturn Judaism's strict monotheism. Miller notes that, even though Hekhalot theology is "dazzlingly fluid", such apparent polytheism must be understood as symbolic. He reads the multiple divine names as facets of one God, not as separate deities. Orlov likewise stresses that the title "Lesser YHWH" underscores Metatron's vice-regal office rather than genuine binitarianism. The mystical motif of God sharing His name with an angel reflects divine oneness by analogy (Metatron inherits God's name) rather than division of the Godhead.

Later medieval authorities such as Saadia Gaon, Maimonides, and Nachmanides interpret any "two powers in heaven" language as metaphorical or polemical. Maimonides famously codifies that one who attributes sovereignty to more than one ruler in heaven is a heretic (Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Teshuvah 3:7). In practice, Jewish tradition resolves the tension by maintaining that Metatron's grandeur derives entirely from the one God. Thus, belief in Metatron's exaltation does not entail a departure from monotheism, as long as God alone remains Creator and ultimate Master.

Conclusion:

The case of Metatron illustrates the boundary of Jewish monotheism. Primary mystical texts do accord him remarkable titles and functions, even calling him "Lesser YHWH", but rabbinic teaching immediately draws the line at worship. The Talmudic stories explicitly reassert that Metatron is subordinate: "do not worship him". Scholarly analyses by figures such as Miller and Orlov echo this resolution. The language of divine investiture is figurative, part of an esoteric onomatology, not an affirmation of two gods. In summary, documented texts about Metatron test the limits of God's unity, but every canonical source ultimately reinforces absolute monotheism. Metatron's "near deification" remains metaphorical or contingent on God's will, so that Torah-defined monotheism is preserved.

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  This is a standard English translation of 3 Enoch (also called Sefer Hekhalot), which is the primary source describing Metatron's exaltation. Sections 12:1 to 5 explicitly show God naming Metatron "the Lesser YHWH". This translation is used to quote and interpret these passages. It is indispensable for analysing the earliest Jewish descriptions of Metatron's status.

- Kiel, Y. (2016, November 6). Enoch's walk with God ends badly in Babylonia. TheTorah.com.
  This online essay by Yishai Kiel summarises rabbinic narratives involving Metatron. It contextualises Talmudic stories about Elisha ben Abuyah and Rav Idit, noting key phrases such as "Lesser YHWH". Kiel's article is cited for primary quotations and background, and it links apocryphal material with rabbinic lore in assessing Metatron's portrayal.

- Miller, M. T. (2012). Chaos and identity: Onomatology in the Hekhalot literature. *Bamidbar: Journal for Jewish Thought and Philosophy*, 3(1), 36–51.
  This academic study of Hekhalot mysticism examines how divine names function in these texts. Miller discusses Metatron's title and the onomatological system that can appear polytheistic. He notes that some readers see a "dazzlingly fluid" theology that blurs God and angels, and he weighs claims of "severely compromised monotheism" against the view that the system is a sophisticated onomatology. This source provides a modern scholarly lens for interpreting Metatron traditions without abandoning monotheism.

- Orlov, A. A. (n.d.). Metatron as the mediator of the divine name: Aural ideology in Hekhalot literature. Marquette University.
  Orlov's essay analyses Metatron's role in mystical texts as mediator of the divine name. He shows how Metatron's epithet "Lesser YHWH" aligns with his function as God's vice-regent. Orlov argues that this title expresses a sublimation of Metatron's vice-regency into a second manifestation of the divine name, rather than a separate deity. This supports the conclusion that Metatron's exaltation symbolises divine immanence rather than polytheism.

- The Babylonian Talmud (Sanhedrin 38b; Chagigah 15a).
  These Talmudic passages are the primary rabbinic sources on Metatron's status. They record the direct encounters in which any hint of "two powers in heaven" is corrected. In Sanhedrin 38b, Rav Idit uses Exodus 23:21 both to explain

Metatron's name and to forbid worship of him. In Chagigah 15a, Elisha ben Abuyah's exclamation of "two powers" is refuted by Metatron's punishment. These passages, cited via Kiel and Miller, are central to the analysis because they reveal the rabbis' own insistence on preserving strict monotheism.

Part X - Historical Evidence of Jewish Rejection of Later Prophets Against Tanakh Criteria

Deuteronomy explicitly provides two tests for true prophecy. First, content fidelity (Deuteronomy 13:1 to 6) requires that a genuine prophet must exhort Israel to obey YHWH alone; anyone who urges worship of other gods is false. Second, predictive accuracy (Deuteronomy 18:15 to 22) demands that a prophet's predictions must come to pass; if not, "that prophet has spoken presumptuously" and is to be put to death. These criteria are well recognised in Jewish tradition. Rabbi Elliot Dorff, for example, notes that Deuteronomy 13 marks true prophets by their monotheistic message, whereas Deuteronomy 18 makes fulfilment the test.

- Monotheistic fidelity (Deuteronomy 13): true prophets exhort loyalty to YHWH and denounce idolatry.
- Predictive test (Deuteronomy 18): a true prophet's oracles must be verified by events.

We can then compare historical cases. In the Book of Amos (8th century BCE), the prophet of Judah who went to Israel, Jewish sources record that the Bethel priest Amaziah denounced him to King Jeroboam II as a "seer" conspiring against Israel and urged Amos to flee back to Judah. This amounted to effective rejection of Amos's message. By Torah standards, Amos was preaching exclusively against Israel's moral and religious failures. He never urged Israel to serve foreign gods, and he accurately foretold the Northern Kingdom's downfall, which occurred under Assyria.

Thus, Amos passes both tests and should have been accepted, yet his contemporaries ignored and rebuffed him. As the Jewish Encyclopedia notes, Amaziah's denouncement "advises him to leave" Israel, forcing Amos to preserve his prophecies in writing for future generations. This clash demonstrates a deviation from Torah law. A true prophet was treated as a criminal rather than heeded, contrary to Deuteronomy 18.

Jeremiah (late 7th to early 6th century BCE) faced even more overt rejection. His stern warnings of Judah's destruction, which later came true in 586 BCE, provoked outrage. The Tanakh recounts that in the Temple court Jeremiah's call for reform was met with fury. "The priests and prophets cried out that Jeremiah was worthy of

death." Jewish tradition confirms this persecution. For example, after Jeremiah dictated his prophecies to Baruch and the scroll was read in the king's court, King Jehoiakim burned it. Even Judah's own authorities treated Jeremiah as a traitor. Officials in Babylon received a letter from Jerusalem's high priest accusing Jeremiah of madness and instructing them to "put Jeremiah in prison and in the stocks". Later, a group of fugitives who fled to Egypt forcibly took Jeremiah along as a "hostage" against his advice. In sum, both secular and religious leaders in Jerusalem and among the exiles repudiated Jeremiah's message.

By Torah criteria, Jeremiah was clearly a true prophet. He never promoted foreign gods, and his predictions of exile and temple destruction were borne out. His rejection by contemporaries thus contradicts Deuteronomy 13 and 18. The community not only failed to honour a true prophet but actively threatened his life, in violation of Torah law, which would only permit execution of proven false prophets. In fact, nowhere in Tanakh do Israelite authorities ever execute a prophet for falsehood. Jeremiah's case shows that, historically, Jews treated an authoritative prophet's unpalatable message as traitorous, even though the Torah mandates obedience to divine messengers.

In exile, Ezekiel (6th century BCE) similarly preached divine judgment and restoration. His community's reaction is less explicitly recorded, but one example is instructive. Ezekiel pronounced Tyre's utter destruction (Ezekiel 26), yet history proved this prophecy false, and the prophet himself later notes that Nebuchadnezzar failed to capture Tyre. Modern scholars such as Sanders highlight that Ezekiel's second account (Ezekiel 29:17 to 19) tacitly admits that the first did not occur. By the rule in Deuteronomy 18, such an unfulfilled prediction would brand Ezekiel as a false prophet. Yet Jewish tradition never labelled Ezekiel false; his book was preserved and he remains a foundational prophet.

Thus, while Ezekiel passes the content test (he criticised idolatry and remained loyal to YHWH), he arguably fails the predictive test. The lack of any punitive response or recorded repudiation implies that the community either reinterpreted the failure spiritually or simply ignored it. This also deviates from a simple reading of Torah law. If taken strictly, Ezekiel should have been discredited, yet his authority was maintained.

Post-exile, the prophets Haggai and Zechariah (late 6th century BCE) similarly encountered questionable fulfilment. Haggai urged Governor Zerubbabel to "be strong" because God would overthrow kingdoms and make Zerubbabel His "chosen signet ring" (Haggai 2:21 to 23). In reality, Zerubbabel vanishes from history within a generation, and Persia remained dominant for around two centuries. Scholars note that Zerubbabel's promised overthrow of imperial powers "did not come true".

Likewise, Dorff observes that Zechariah's hopeful visions for Zerubbabel and the Temple were never realised.

We have no narrative of Haggai or Zechariah being exiled or punished for false prophecy. Indeed, both were supported by the Persian-backed leadership to rebuild the Temple. However, their popular messages clearly violated the explicit criterion of Deuteronomy 18. In fact, Zechariah's own apocalyptic vision envisions a time of profound scepticism: "If anyone prophesies, his own father and mother who bore him will say to him, 'You shall die, for you have lied in the name of the Lord'" (Zechariah 13:3). This suggests that in the early Second Temple period there was already deep distrust of prophets who failed the test. Nevertheless, neither Haggai nor Zechariah is cast out of the canon. Instead, their unmet promises may have contributed to the developing view that prophecy was a dangerous or "bad" profession.

Malachi (mid-5th century BCE) is traditionally regarded as the final biblical prophet. His book rebukes Israel's spiritual decay but contains no dramatic, dated prophecy that is recorded as fulfilled in the narrative, and no call to another god. After him, the Hebrew Bible records no new prophets. The Tanakh itself gives no formal declaration that prophecy has ended, yet later Jewish tradition explicitly states that prophecy ceased with Malachi and will only resume with Elijah in the messianic age. Rabbinic texts such as Sanhedrin 11a teach that after Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi passed away, "the spirit of prophecy was taken from Israel".

Thus, for the postbiblical community, the tests of Deuteronomy 13 and 18 lost practical force: no one alive could satisfy those criteria. Instead, Judaism turned decisively to the Torah as the eternal divine word. As Dorff explains, the rabbis elevated Deuteronomy 17:8 to 13 so that legal rulings by the Sanhedrin, not new prophets, became binding. In that sense, the lack of later accepted prophets aligns with Torah ideals in the rabbinic reading (only YHWH truly speaks, and He has already spoken), but it also shows a decisive shift. Jews came to reject any claimed prophet who did not fit existing revelation and rabbinic frameworks.

The inclusion of prophetic books that contain partially fulfilled or unfulfilled predictions indicates that canon formation prioritized communal identity and historical memory over strict application of Deuteronomic prophecy criteria. This inconsistency suggests a post-exilic shift from law-based verification of prophecy to tradition-based preservation.

Conclusion:

Throughout Israel's history, we find clear instances of prophets being rejected by Jewish authorities or communities. Notably, every prophet whom the Torah would vindicate on both tests (such as Amos and Jeremiah) was derided or ignored, in direct tension with Deuteronomy's command to obey God's messengers. Conversely, prophets who appear to fail the Deuteronomic tests (Ezekiel on Tyre; Haggai and Zechariah on Zerubbabel) were nonetheless retained in the canon, though their specific unfulfilled oracles were downplayed or reinterpreted.

In sum, historical and textual evidence indicates that Jews often treated genuine prophets as false, and treated incomplete prophecies as uncanny but not disqualifying. This pattern deviates from the simple Deuteronomic model, which assumes that prophets will either be properly heeded or executed as impostors. Instead, Jewish tradition eventually concluded that ongoing prophecy itself was suspect, ceasing effectively after Malachi and leaving the Torah, read through rabbinic interpretation, as the final authority.

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II" and was forced to leave the northern kingdom. It highlights that Amos's prophecies were recorded and preserved when contemporaries refused to hear them. The article supports the view that Jewish authorities rejected a true prophet's message in violation of Deuteronomic law.

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  The Jeremiah entry documents the prophet's trials. It describes how "priests and prophets cried out that Jeremiah was worthy of death" and details attempts to imprison him (Jeremiah 20:2; 37:15 to 16). It also recounts how Jeremiah's scroll was burned by King Jehoiakim and how even Jewish officials sought to silence him. This source provides historical and textual evidence of Jewish leadership opposing Jeremiah despite his fidelity to Torah.

- Sanders, P. (2024). When prophecy does not come true. Protestant Theological University Bible blog.
  This scholarly blog post by an Old Testament professor discusses unfulfilled biblical prophecies. Sanders explicitly analyses Ezekiel's Tyre prophecies, noting that Ezekiel's prediction of Tyre's destruction by Nebuchadnezzar never occurred. He observes that Ezekiel himself later admits that "neither he nor his army received any reward from Tyre for the effort". This modern analysis confirms the mismatch between Ezekiel's oracles and the historical outcome, illustrating how even canonical prophets can fail the Deuteronomic predictive test.

- O'Kennedy, D. F. (2014). Haggai 2:20 to 23: Call to rebellion or eschatological expectation? *Old Testament Essays*, 27(2).
  This peer-reviewed article examines Haggai's famous oracle. It notes that Haggai's promises (for example Zerubbabel as God's "signet ring" and the divine overthrow of kingdoms) did not materialise. O'Kennedy argues that Haggai 2:20 to 23 "represents one of these prophecies of salvation that did not come true", and emphasises that Zerubbabel quickly disappears from history while the Persian empire endured. This scholarly source supports the view that some post-exilic prophecies failed to meet Deuteronomic criteria, despite being officially accepted.

- Angel, H. (n.d.). The end of prophecy: Malachi's position in the spiritual development of Israel. *Conversations: Jewish Ideas Institute*.
  This article explores the Jewish tradition that Malachi was the last prophet. It quotes rabbinic and medieval authorities stating that prophecy ceased with Malachi. Angel points out that even though the Hebrew Bible itself does not formally declare an end to prophecy, Nehemiah's time knew false prophets but

continued to acknowledge prophecy. The piece underlines the historical understanding that, after Malachi, Israel received no new legitimate prophetic voices, a viewpoint aligned with the later rabbinic reading that the age of prophecy had closed.

- Dorff, E. N. (2009). Open minds and hearts to hear God's word. Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies, American Jewish University.
  Rabbi Elliot Dorff's commentary explicitly contrasts Deuteronomy 13 and 18. He summarises that Deuteronomy 13 identifies true prophets by their message (faithfulness to YHWH), while Deuteronomy 18 demands fulfilled predictions. Dorff notes several canonical prophets (including Ezekiel, Haggai, and Zechariah) whose prophecies did not literally come true.

  He also highlights Zechariah 13:2 to 4, which predicts an era when false prophets would be executed by their own families, and he references rabbinic claims that prophecy ceased with the destruction of the Temple. This source provides a modern Jewish scholarly perspective, linking the biblical tests to later historical attitudes and showing how deference to the Torah and rabbinic authority replaced reliance on new prophets.

Part XI: Islamic Perspective on Post Mosaic Jewish Deviation – Theological and Historical Critique

In classical Sunni Islam, Jews are acknowledged as People of the Book (Ahl al Kitab), yet many Islamic sources assert that segments of the post Mosaic Jewish community departed from pure monotheism and corrupted their scriptures. The Quran explicitly criticises certain Jewish groups for altering the revealed Law (tahrif) and for theological deviations (shirk) that are inconsistent with tawhid, absolute divine unity. According to Quranic passages and prophetic traditions, these deviations include textual distortion of the Torah and replacing pure monotheism with erroneous beliefs, such as attributing divinity to prophets or angels. Classical exegetes like Ibn Kathir and al Tabari interpret these texts as evidence that after Moses, some Jews introduced interpolations and false teachings, thereby straying from the original monotheism of Moses.

This section examines these themes through Quranic verses, hadith reports, and Sunni tafsir, providing a historically grounded account of how Muslim scholars viewed Jewish belief and practice from the time of the Prophet Muhammad through later Islamic history.

Scriptural Integrity (Tahrif) and Jewish Scripture

Islamic tradition repeatedly charges that some Jews engaged in tahrif, understood as corrupting, altering, or misrepresenting their revealed Book. For instance, Quran 2:79 states:

"Woe to those who write the Book with their own hands, then say, 'This is from Allah,' in order to exchange it for a small price…"

Tafsir Ibn Kathir explains that this verse denounces rabbis who fabricate or distort divine scripture for worldly gain. Similarly, the Quran (3:78) warns:

"Among them is a party who twist their tongues while reading the Book, to make you think it is from the Book, while it is not; and they say, 'It is from Allah,' but it is not from Allah…"

Ibn Kathir comments that this refers to Jews who "distort Allah's words with their tongues, change them from their appropriate places, and alter their intended meanings" in the Torah.

Other verses echo these themes. Quran 4:46 describes some Jews as "distorting words from their proper usages, and saying, 'We hear and disobey'…" by playing on phrases and pronunciation. Quran 5:13 likewise states that because Jews broke their covenant, "They distort words from their proper usages and have forgotten a portion of that of which they were reminded." Ibn Kathir's tafsir on 5:13 explicitly confirms this reading, explaining that those who "change the words from their right places, altering His Book from its apparent meanings and distorting its indications" are among those cursed for breaking God's covenant.

In mainstream Sunni exegesis, these verses do not mean that the heavenly archetype of the Torah has been altered, but rather that some members of the Jewish community misrepresented or selectively cited the text in practice. The emphasis is on misquotation, intentional ambiguity, and interpretive manipulation. Effectively, such behaviour is treated as inserting human interpretations and additions under the claim that "this is from Allah" even when Allah did not say it.

Key Quranic verses on Jewish scripture distortion:

- **Quran 2:79:** "Woe to those who write the Book with their own hands, then say, 'This is from Allah,' in order to exchange it for a small price…" Ibn Kathir notes that this targets rabbis fabricating or altering passages.

- **Quran 3:78:** "There is among them a party who alter the Scripture with their tongues… and they say, 'This is from Allah,' but it is not from Allah…" Tafsir Ibn Kathir explains that these Jews "distort Allah's words to deceive."
- **Quran 4:46:** "Among the Jews are those who distort words from their proper usages…" referring to deliberate wordplay and mispronunciation to mock or subvert revelation.
- **Quran 5:13:** "They distort words from their proper usages and have forgotten a portion of that of which they were reminded." Ibn Kathir reads this as describing those who "change the words from their right places, altering His Book from its apparent meanings and distorting its indications."

Sunni theologians generally take these Quranic critiques as literal and historical statements about particular groups among the Jews. Certain scribes and leaders are portrayed as consciously altering or misrepresenting Torah passages, thereby violating the divine covenant. In academic terms these are theological claims within Islam: authors like Ibn Kathir present them as factual accounts of Jewish practice. The Islamic perspective portrays Jews as stewards of a sacred book who, in this narrative, failed to preserve and transmit it without distortion.

Theological Deviations and Tawhid

Sunni Islam's standard of pure monotheism, tawhid, is uncompromising. Any hint of associating partners or offspring with God is branded shirk, a grave form of polytheism. Classical exegesis accuses some Jews of such errors. One famous Quranic allegation is that a group among the Jews claimed Uzayr (Ezra) was "the son of Allah" (Quran 9:30):

"The Jews say, 'Ezra is the son of Allah,' and the Christians say, 'The Messiah is the son of Allah.'… How deluded they are."

Tafsir literature treats this statement as evidence of shirk by certain Jews. One commentary explains that calling a prophet "son of God" places them in the same category as pre-Islamic idolaters, who declared angels to be the daughters of Allah. The abridged English Ibn Kathir makes this explicit on Quran 9:30, stating that both statements are false and associating them with polytheism: "The Jews and the Christians associate partners with Allah: the Jews do so by claiming that Uzayr is the son of Allah… By saying such things, they are similar to the idolaters before them."

Another theme is divine progeny or kinship. The Quran emphatically rejects any notion that God has literal children. Quran 6:100, in the Sahih International translation, reads:

"Yet they associate the jinn with Allah, although He created them, and they falsely attribute to Him sons and daughters out of ignorance. Exalted is He and high above what they describe."

Traditional tafsir, including Ibn Kathir, explains that "they" here covers those who attribute angels or other beings as God's offspring. Some classical commentators understand this as rebuking claims (reported in some sources) that angels were daughters of Allah. The implication is clear: attributing "son of God" status to any being at all, whether Ezra, Jesus, or angels, violates tawhid.

Islamic sources also stress doctrinal divergence beyond specific claims of godhead. Muslims view the Torah as originally commanded by Allah, but hold that rabbinic Judaism later added laws and narratives that Islam regards as human accretions, such as some detailed legal rules or stories about prophets. While Moses is revered as a prophet of pure monotheism, Sunni belief is that later generations among the Children of Israel introduced interpretations or superstitions not sanctioned by divine revelation. Ibn Kathir's commentary on Quran 2:79, although speaking in general terms, mentions rulers and scholars who mixed divine guidance with fables and personal opinions.

From an Islamic vantage point, Jewish theology after Moses therefore failed to match the rigorous standard of tawhid. Any belief that suggests God has consorts, progeny, or a shareable status, or any practice that departs from direct revelation in favour of human invention, is considered a deviation. The Quran repeatedly states that some Jews claim obedience to God ("we hear and obey") while their actions, including textual manipulation or unjust legal rulings, contradict that claim.

Quran and Hadith Critiques of Jews

Beyond general theological principles, specific Quranic passages and hadith recount historical criticisms of the Jewish communities encountered by the Prophet Muhammad. The Quran chastises some Jews for distortion and forgetfulness (for example, 5:13) and for treachery, highlighting events of the Medinan period. Quran 5:13 notes, "You will repeatedly uncover their treachery, except for a few of them," which commentators connect to repeated breaches of treaty obligations. This is linked in traditional accounts to incidents such as the betrayal of certain Jewish tribes during conflict in Medina.

The Quran (59:2 to 4) is interpreted as referring to the expulsion of the Banu Nadir, and Quran 9:30 to 31 discusses Jewish and Christian beliefs regarding Ezra and the Messiah in a polemical framework. Classical tafsir treats these verses as illustrations of how particular Jewish groups resisted or opposed the message brought by Muhammad.

Prophetic traditions (hadith) also include explicit references to Jews in eschatological and moral contexts. Several rigorously authenticated hadith foretell future conflict between Muslims and Jews. For example, Sahih al Bukhari reports the Prophet saying:

"You will fight the Jews, and you will kill them until the Jews hide behind a stone or a tree. The stone or tree will say, 'O Muslim, O servant of Allah, there is a Jew behind me; come and kill him.'"

Another narration in Bukhari, with a parallel in Sahih Muslim, links this conflict directly to the approach of the Last Hour:

"The Hour will not be established until you fight the Jews; the stone behind which a Jew will be hiding will say, 'O Muslim, O servant of Allah, this Jew is behind me, come and kill him.'"

These traditions are frequently cited in Islamic literature as predictions of an ultimate confrontation, and they reflect the severe tone that characterises much of the medieval Muslim outlook on Jews. While such hadith are eschatological in genre and are sometimes given different emphases in contemporary discourse, classical Sunni scholarship generally interprets them as genuine prophetic statements concerning future events involving Jews.

In contrast, there are respected reports of individual Jews who embraced Islam, such as the companion Abdullah ibn Salam. However, these are presented as exceptions. The prevailing tone in tafsir and hadith is that by the time of Muhammad, many Jewish leaders rejected his claim to prophethood and thereby closed the door, from the Islamic perspective, to recognition of later prophets.

This links with the broader Islamic belief that the Quran abrogated previous scriptures. The Prophet is reported to have said, "I am the last of the prophets" (Quran 33:40 is read as supporting this finality), and classical theology holds that no prophet will come after him. After the Prophet's death, Muslim scholars taught that Jews continued to follow a path separate from Islam: their law remained what they inherited through Moses and Talmudic tradition, while Islam introduced what is viewed as the final and preserved revelation.

Crucially, Islam claims that only the Quran remains preserved without alteration. All other scriptures, including the Torah and Gospel as used by Jews and Christians, are considered textually or interpretively altered. For later Muslim thinkers, this means that post Mosaic Judaism, as practised by rabbis and laypeople, is inherently deviated: its scriptures are seen as impure in transmission and its theology as incomplete in comparison with Islam. From the time of Muhammad onwards, classical Sunni theology thus portrays Jewish and Muslim beliefs as fundamentally divergent. The

Muslim ummah follows what it regards as the uncorrupted and final divine law, while Judaism follows a legacy that is considered theologically and textually compromised.

Summary

From a Sunni Islamic perspective, Jews are recognised as recipients of earlier divine revelation but are critiqued on two main fronts.

First, many Quranic verses and hadith affirm that some Jews departed from true monotheism by associating partners with God (shirk) and by committing tahrif in their scriptures. Classical Sunni commentaries, particularly Ibn Kathir, interpret verses such as Quran 2:79, 3:78, 4:46, and 5:13 as literal descriptions of actions by Jewish leaders and scribes: writing spurious texts, altering wording, and twisting meanings in the Torah for worldly motives.

Second, Islam holds that genuine tawhid requires absolute rejection of any divine sonship or partnership. The Quran explicitly denounces statements like "Ezra is the son of Allah" (9:30) and criticises those who present angels or other beings as the offspring of God, treating such claims as forms of polytheism.

From the time of the Prophet onward, this theological rift, as seen through Islamic sources, only widened. The Muslim community embraced the Quran as final and uncorrupted, whereas Jews continued to rely on texts that Muslims consider altered. Canonical hadith literature even anticipates a violent eschatological confrontation involving Jews, which reinforces the image of a deep and enduring divide.

Throughout these sources, the Islamic narrative is that of a fallen People of the Book: once chosen and entrusted with revelation, yet censured for forsaking God's unity and for failing to preserve the purity of the divine law. In modern historical study, these claims are often treated as part of Islamic polemical theology, but within Sunni tradition they function as authoritative explanations of Jewish history and belief. Quranic pronouncements of censure, the detailed accusations in Ibn Kathir's tafsir, and hadith depicting ultimate conflict collectively present post Mosaic Judaism as deviating from pure monotheism through both scriptural tahrif and theological error.

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Annotated Bibliography

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  The central Islamic scripture cited throughout this section. Verses such as Quran 2:79, 3:78, 4:46, 5:13, 6:100, and 9:30 are drawn from this translation. The Quran provides the doctrinal basis for Islamic critiques of Jewish scripture and theology. It frames certain Jews as "those who write the book with their own hands" and as people who distort words from their proper usages, which supports the classical charge of corruption "tahrif".

- **Sahih al Bukhari (Darussalam edition). (n.d.). Hadith 2925–2926 (Vol. 4, Book 52).**
  One of the two most authoritative Sunni hadith collections. The cited narrations describe an apocalyptic confrontation between Muslims and Jews, in which stones and trees expose hiding Jews to Muslim fighters. These reports are used in classical theology to illustrate future conflict and to underscore the perceived intractability of Jewish opposition to Islam. Modern scholarship often explores their historical context; here they document how classical Sunni sources envisage the fate of Jewish Muslim relations.

- **Sahih Muslim (Darussalam edition). (n.d.). Hadith 6985/2922 (Kitab al Fitan).**
  This collection provides parallel eschatological hadith similar to Bukhari's report about fighting the Jews before the Last Hour. The overlap between Bukhari and Muslim on this motif strengthens its authority in Sunni tradition. These narrations underline the severity of the classical eschatological portrayal of Jews and confirm that the theme of ultimate conflict is not an isolated report.

- **Ibn Kathir, A. S. I. (English trans.). *Tafsir Ibn Kathir*. Riyadh: Darussalam.**
  A foundational Sunni tafsir relied upon for interpreting key Quranic verses about Jews. The English abridgement of Ibn Kathir's work is widely used. His commentary on Quran 2:79, 3:78, 4:46, and 5:13 states explicitly that some Jews "distort Allah's words with their tongues" and "change the words from their right places," presenting these actions as deliberate and blameworthy. His tafsir on Quran 9:30 also identifies the statement "Uzayr is the son of Allah" as an

act of shirk, aligning some Jews with earlier polytheists. This work provides the classical exegetical framework for understanding Islamic accusations of tahrif and theological deviation.

- **Al Tabari, A. J. (10th century). *Jami al bayan an tawil ay al Quran.*** Although not directly quoted in detail above, al Tabari's tafsir is historically one of the earliest and most influential commentaries on the Quran. On verses like Quran 2:79 and 3:78, al Tabari also discusses Jewish misrepresentation and misreading of scripture. In a comprehensive study, his analysis would be placed alongside Ibn Kathir's to show broad agreement among classical Sunni exegetes that certain Jewish groups altered meanings or formulations of the Torah. English selections of his tafsir are available in several modern editions.

Each of these sources underpins the description of the Sunni Islamic view presented in this section. The Glorious Quran provides the primary theological Islamic perspective, followed by the second source of divine guidance in Islam, which is the authentic Sunnah and Hadith. Ibn Kathir and related tafasir explain and historicise those positions, and Bukhari and Muslim record prophetic statements that shape the classical Muslim viewpoint of Jewish history and destiny.

Part XII — Synthesis and Conclusion: Thematic and Chronological Integration

This concluding section synthesizes the findings of the previous parts of the study to assess the extent of deviation from Torah-defined absolute monotheism in Jewish belief and practice from the time of Moses to the present, using only non-Islamic academic sources and integrating the authentic Sunni Islamic (Salafi/Athari) perspective as a theological lens.

A cross-disciplinary synthesis of archaeology, philology, and comparative religion shows that Jewish monotheism evolved through continual negotiation with surrounding cultures. Rather than a linear decline or progression, the historical data reveal cycles of reform and relapse shaped by political upheavals, diaspora pressures, and internal theological debate.

I. Thematic Synthesis of Deviation Categories

1. Idolatry and Syncretism

Evidence from the Hebrew Bible, archaeology, and epigraphic studies reveals consistent deviation from Torah-prescribed monotheism during the Judges and

monarchic periods. Household idols (teraphim), Yahweh-Asherah inscriptions (e.g., Kuntillet Ajrud), and the prevalence of Canaanite worship practices illustrate recurrent syncretism (Dever, 2005; Keel & Uehlinger, 1998).

2. Intermediary Worship

Second Temple texts (e.g., 1 Enoch, 2 Baruch), the Dead Sea Scrolls, and later mystical traditions show theological developments involving exalted patriarchs, angels, and apocalyptic figures who sometimes function as intercessors (Horsley, 2003). These challenge Deuteronomic prohibitions (Deut 18:10–14) and blur monotheistic boundaries.

3. Rabbinic Authority Over Torah

Rabbinic literature often grants halakhic authority to sages, even when rulings appear to diverge from the plain Torah text (Neusner, 1994). The notion of the Oral Torah and its authority developed into a structure in which rabbinic consensus could override individual scriptural interpretation, a tension discussed by Halbertal (1997).

4. Mystical Ascent and Semi-Divine Status

Hekhalot and Merkavah literature introduce cosmologies with heavenly palaces, divine thrones, and angelic hierarchies. Figures such as Metatron are described with divine titles (e.g., Lesser YHWH) (Schafer, 2009), suggesting functional, if not ontological, semi-divinity, which is incompatible with Exodus 20:3 and Deuteronomy 6:4.

5. Rejection of Prophets

Biblical and post-biblical sources reveal instances in which prophets such as Jeremiah were persecuted (Jer 26), Ezekiel's legitimacy was questioned, and post-exilic prophets like Malachi were minimally received. The Torah sets objective standards for prophecy (Deut 13; Deut 18), and Jewish history shows mixed adherence to them.

II. Chronological Recapitulation

From the Sinai revelation onward, Israelite religion experienced frequent doctrinal and cultic compromise. The wilderness rebellions, idolatry in Canaan, monarchic syncretism, Second Temple intermediary theology, and Rabbinic legalism illustrate a long arc of religious evolution diverging from the Torah's strict monotheism.

III. Islamic Evaluation and Theological Assessment

From a Sunni Islamic (Salafi/Athari) theological perspective, absolute monotheism (tawhid) permits no intermediaries and no shared participation in creation, knowledge, or worship (Quran 112:1–4). The Jewish historical deviations explored here, particularly the invocation of angels, mysticism, rabbinic overreach, and scriptural distortion (Quran 2:75–79), confirm Islam's assertion of tahrif (textual and interpretive corruption).

The Quran records that previous nations were favored with divine guidance yet fell into error by invoking saints or scholars (arbaban min duni Allah, Quran 9:31). From this theological lens, Jewish intermediary practices and legalist deviations affirm that post-Mosaic Judaism compromised tawhid, thereby justifying the Islamic finality of the mission of Prophet Muhammad (Quran 5:15–19).

IV. Implications for Scholarship

This study contributes to Biblical Studies and Comparative Theology by:

- Offering a textual and historical account of Jewish theological developments across millennia.
- Demonstrating, with academic rigor, the recurring challenges to Torah-defined monotheism.
- Providing an original integration of Islamic theological critique with academic historiography.

Controlled Academic Response to Jewish Monotheism Apologetics

Academic Evaluation of Jewish Monotheism Apologetics

Modern Jewish apologetic scholarship frequently argues that post-biblical developments in angelology, mysticism, and rabbinic authority do not constitute deviations from monotheism because all such phenomena are interpreted as symbolic, metaphorical, or subordinate expressions of the one God.

This defense is articulated in rationalist traditions deriving from Maimonidean theology, which insists that angels and sefirot possess no independent ontological status apart from God (Kellner, 2006). Similarly, Kabbalistic literature often reinterprets hypostatic entities as symbolic representations of divine attributes rather than literal plurality.

However, from a strict Torah-defined monotheistic framework, the central issue is not symbolic intent but cultic function. The Torah prohibits not only polytheistic belief but also any devotional orientation toward created beings (Exod 20:3–5). When angels are invoked, enthroned, or function as mediators of worship, this exceeds metaphorical theology and enters ritual practice.

Furthermore, historical documentation such as the Two Powers tradition, Metatron veneration, and heavenly ascent literature demonstrates that not all Jewish groups interpreted these entities symbolically. Some communities treated them with functional religious authority, necessitating later rabbinic condemnation (Segal, 1977).

Thus, while apologetic models successfully preserve philosophical monotheism at the doctrinal level, they do not fully resolve the historical evidence of intermediary religiosity at the popular and mystical levels.

V. Final Reflection

Jewish religious history, rich in resilience and reform, reflects both fidelity and deviation from its earliest monotheistic ideals. From household idols to angelic hierarchies and rabbinic codification, the tension between divine transcendence and theological innovation remains central. The Islamic critique underscores the Quran's position as a rectifier of past distortions. This synthesis affirms the value of multidisciplinary, non-polemical religious analysis rooted in scriptural integrity and historical clarity.

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APPENDIX A: Visual and Comparative Resources Supporting the Study of Post-Mosaic Jewish Deviation from Torah-Defined Monotheism

A. Artifact Descriptions and Archaeological Correlates

1. Judean Pillar Figurines (8th–6th century BCE)

Commonly unearthed in Iron Age II strata across Israelite territories, these female figurines, often interpreted as fertility symbols or depictions of Asherah, represent a widespread domestic cultic practice. Their ubiquity contrasts sharply with Torah monotheism prohibiting idols (Exod 20:4–5).
(See Keel & Uehlinger, 1998)

2. Ketef Hinnom Amulets (7th–6th century BCE)

Two small silver scrolls inscribed with priestly blessings from Numbers 6, discovered in a Jerusalem tomb, offer rare epigraphic evidence of personal religious expression during the First Temple period. Their syncretistic or protective use remains debated.
(See Barkay et al., 2004)

3. The Kuntillet Ajrud Inscriptions (c. 800 BCE)

Pithos inscriptions referring to Yahweh of Samaria and his Asherah highlight a clear example of syncretistic Israelite worship practices.
(See Meshel, 2012)

B. Diagrams and Theological Development Charts

1. Theological Trajectory Diagram: From Mosaic Monotheism to Mystical Intermediaries

- Phase 1: Absolute Monotheism (Torah)
- Phase 2: National Syncretism (Monarchy era)
- Phase 3: Emergence of Angelology and Apocalyptic Intermediaries (Second Temple)
- Phase 4: Rabbinic Authority and Legal Supremacy (Mishnah-Talmud)
- Phase 5: Mystical Ascent and Semi-Deification (Hekhalot, Kabbalah)

2. Comparison Between Torah Monotheism vs Post-Mosaic Jewish Practices

a) The Torah mandates exclusive devotion to YHWH (Deut 6:4), whereas later traditions introduce divine intermediaries.
b) The Torah forbids mediation (Exod 20:3–5), whereas later mystical corpus invokes angels.
c) The Torah forbids legislative alteration (Deut 4:2), yet rabbinic systems later override plain meaning.
d) Mystical ascent is absent in the Torah but emerges prominently in later traditions.
e) The Torah condemns syncretism, yet archaeology confirms persistent Asherah worship.
f) The Torah defines prophecy in Deut 13 and Deut 18, yet prophets such as Jeremiah were rejected.

C. Integration with Islamic Perspective (Part IX)

Overlay comparison between Torah monotheism, documented Jewish deviations, and Quranic critique (Surah al-Baqarah and al-Maidah).

APA 7 Reference List (Appendix)

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Appendix B: Philological Development of El, Elohim, and YHWH

The divine titles used in the Hebrew Bible reflect both linguistic continuity with the ancient Near Eastern environment and theological differentiation through Israelite monotheism. The term El appears widely across Northwest Semitic languages and denotes a high god within the Ugaritic pantheon. In Ugaritic texts, El functions as the chief deity presiding over a council of lesser gods (Smith, 2001).

The Hebrew term Elohim is grammatically plural yet frequently governs singular verbs when referring to the God of Israel. Scholars widely interpret this plural form as

either a remnant of earlier Semitic divine plurality or a plural of majesty rather than numerical plurality (Cross, 1973; Smith, 2001).

The Tetragrammaton YHWH represents Israel's distinctive covenant name for God. Unlike El and Elohim, YHWH does not have a clear parallel as a personal deity name within the known Ugaritic pantheon. This linguistic distinctiveness reinforces the Torah's theological insistence upon Israel's exclusive covenantal God.

The progressive restriction of divine plurality in Israelite language parallels the theological struggle toward exclusive monotheism. Yet the retention of plural linguistic forms contributed to later hypostatic speculation in angelology and mystical traditions.

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Allah Knows Best.

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