

## YAHWEH יהוה

I. Yahweh is the name of the official god of Israel, both in the northern kingdom and in Judah. Since the Achaemenid period, religious scruples led to the custom of not pronouncing the name of Yahweh; in the liturgy as well as in everyday life, such expressions as ‘the →[Lord](#)’ (’*ādōnāy*, lit. ‘my Lord’, LXX κύριος) or ‘the →[Name](#)’ were substituted for it. As a matter of consequence, the correct pronunciation of the tetragrammaton was gradually lost: the Masoretic form ‘Jehovah’ is in reality a combination of the consonants of the tetragrammaton with the vocals of ’*ādōnāy*, the *ḥaṭēf pataḥ* of ’*ādōnāy* becoming a mere *shewa* because of the yodh of *yhwh* (ALFRINK 1948). The transcription ‘Yahweh’ is a scholarly convention, based on such Greek transcriptions as *Ιαουε/ Ιαουαι* (Clement of Alexandria, [Stromata 5, 6, 34, 5](#)), *Ιαβε/ Ιαβαι* (Epiphanius of Salamis, *Adv. Haer.* 1, 3, 40, 5 and Theodoretus of Cyrrhus, *Quaest. in Ex. XV; Haer. fab. comp.* 5, 3).

The form Yahweh (*yhwh*) has been established as primitive; abbreviations such as Yah, Yahû, Yô, and Yehô are secondary (CROSS 1973:61). The abbreviated (or hypocoristic) forms of the name betray regional predilections: thus Yw (‘Yau’ in Neo-Assyrian sources) is especially found in a North-Israelite context; Yh, on the other hand, is predominantly Judaeon (cf. WEIPPERT 1980:247–248). The alleged attestation of Yw as an onomastic element on an arrowhead dated to the 11th cent. BCE on the basis of its script (F. M. CROSS, [An Inscribed Arrowhead of the Eleventh Century BCE in the Bible Lands Museum in Jerusalem](#), *Erlsr* 23 [1992] 21\*–26\*, esp. n. 3), still maintained by J. C. DE MOOR (*The Rise of Yahwism* [2nd ed.; Leuven 1997] 165–166), is uncertain on epigraphical grounds (P. BORDREUIL, [Flèches phéniciennes inscrites](#), *RB* 99 [1992] 208; A. LEMAIRE, [Epigraphie palestinienne: nouveaux documents II-décennie 1985–1995](#), *Henoch* 17 [1996] 211). The form Yhw is said to be originally Judaeon (WEIPPERT 1980: 247), but its occurrence in the northern wayfarer’s station of Kuntillet ‘*Ajrud* shows that it was not unknown among Northern Israelites either. In the frequently attested Nabataean personal name ‘*bd’hyw* (variant ‘*bd’hy*), the element ‘*hyw* (‘*hy*) has been interpreted as a spelling of the divine name Yahweh (M. LIDZBARSKI, *ESE* 3 [1915] 270 n. 1); it is not certain whether it is a theonym or an anthroponym, though, and a connection with the tetragrammaton is unproven (KNAUF 1984). It is unclear whether an allegedly northern Syrian deity *Ιεω* (Porphyry, *Adv. Christ.* fr. 41, apud Eusebius, [Praep. Ev. I, 9, 21](#); cf. *Ιαω* in Theodoretus, *Graec. aff. cur.* II 44–45 and Macrobius, *Sat.* I 18–20) is related to the god Yahweh. In the Mishna, the divine name is usually written יְיָ in combination with *šēwā* and *qāmeš* (WALKER 1951).

II. The cult of Yahweh is not originally at home in Palestine. Outside Israel, Yahweh was not worshipped in the West-Semitic world—despite affirmations to the contrary (*pace*, e.g. G. GARBINI, *History and Ideology in Ancient Israel* [London & New York 1988] 52–65). Before 1200 BCE, the name Yahweh is not found in any Semitic text. The stir caused by PETTINATO (e.g. Ebla and the Bible, *BA* 43 [1980] 203–216, esp. 203–205) who claimed to have found the shortened form of the name Yahweh (‘Ya’) as a divine element in theophoric names from Ebla (ca. 2400–2250 BCE) is unfounded. As the final element of personal names, *-ya* is often a hypocoristic ending, not a theonym (A. ARCHI, [The Epigraphic](#)

[Evidence from Ebla and the Old Testament](#), *Bib* 60 (1979) 556–566, esp. 556–560). MÜLLER argues that the sign NI, read *yà* by Pettinato, is conventionally short for NI-NI = *ì-lí*, ‘my (personal) god’; it stands for *ilī* or *ilu* (MÜLLER 1980:83; 1981:306–307). This solution also explains the occurrence of the speculated element \**ya* at the beginning of personal names; thus <sup>d</sup>*yà-ra-mu* should be read either as DINGIR-lí-ra-mu or as <sup>d</sup>*ilix-ra-mu*, both readings yielding the name Iliramu, ‘My god is exalted’. In no list of gods or offerings is the mysterious god \*Ya ever mentioned; his cult at Ebla is a chimera.

Yahweh was not known at Ugarit either; the singular name Yw (vocalisation unknown) in a damaged passage of the Baal Cycle ([KTU 1.1 iv:14](#)) cannot convincingly be interpreted as an abbreviation for ‘Yahweh’ (*pace*, e.g., DE MOOR 1990:113–118). Also after 1200 BCE, Yahweh is seldom mentioned in non-Israelite texts. The assertion that “Yahweh was worshipped as a major god” in North Syria in the eighth century BCE (S. DALLEY, [Yahweh in Hamath in the 8th century BC](#), *VT* 40 [1990] 21–32, quotation p 29), cannot be maintained. The claim is based on the names Azriyau and Yaubi’di, attested as indigenous rulers from north Syrian states in the 8th cent. BCE. The explanation of these names offered by Dalley is highly dubious; more satisfactory interpretations are possible (VAN DER TOORN 1992:88–90).

The earliest West Semitic text mentioning Yahweh—excepting the biblical evidence—is the Victory Stela written by Mesha, the Moabite king from the 9th century BCE. The Moabite ruler recalls his military successes against Israel in the time of Ahab: “And →[Chemosh](#) said to me, ‘Go, take Nebo from Israel!’ So I went by night and I engaged in fight against her from the break of dawn until noon. And I took her and I killed her entire population: seven thousand men, boys, women, girls, and maid servants, for I devoted her to destruction (*hḥrmth*) for Ashtar-Chemosh. And I took from there the ‘[r’]ly of Yahweh and I dragged them before Chemosh” ([KA 181:14–18](#)). Evidently, Yahweh is not presented here as a Moabite deity. He is presented as the official god of the Israelites, worshipped throughout Samaria, as far as its outer borders since Nebo (נְבוֹ in the Mesha Stela, נְבוֹ in the Bible), situated in North-Western Moab, was a border town.

The absence of references to a Syrian or Palestinian cult of Yahweh outside Israel suggests that the god does not belong to the traditional circle of West Semitic deities. The origins of his veneration must be sought for elsewhere. A number of texts suggest that Yahweh was worshipped in southern Edom and Midian before his cult spread to Palestine. There are two Egyptian texts that mention Yahweh. In these texts from the 14th and 13th centuries BCE, Yahweh is neither connected with the Israelites, nor is his cult located in Palestine. The texts speak about “Yahu in the land of the Shosu-beduins” (*t3 š3św jhw3*; R. GIVEON, *Les bédouins Shosou des documents égyptiens* [Leiden 1971] no. 6a [pp. 26–28] and no. 16a [pp. 74–77]; note WEIPPERT 1974:427, 430 for the corrected reading). The one text is from the reign of Amenophis III (first part of the 14th cent. BCE; cf. HERMANN 1967) and the other from the reign of Ramses II (13th cent. BCE; cf. H. W. FAIRMAN, [Preliminary Report on the Excavations at ‘Amārah West, Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, 1938–9](#), *JEA* 25 [1939] 139–144, esp. 141). In the Ramses II list, the name occurs in a context which also mentions Seir (assuming that *s’rr* stands for Seir). It may be tentatively concluded that this “Yahu in the land of the Shosu-beduins” is to be situated in the area of Edom and Midian (WEIPPERT 1974: 271; AXELSSON 1987:60; *pace* WEINFELD 1987:304).

In these Egyptian texts *Yhw* is used as a toponym (KNAUF 1988:46–47). Yet a relationship with the deity by the same name is a reasonable assumption (*pace* M. WEIPPERT, [“Heiliger Krieg” in Israel und Assyrien](#), ZAW 84 [1972] 460–493, esp. 491 n. 144); whether the god took his name from the region or vice versa remains undecided (note that R. GIVEON, [“The Cities of Our God” \(2 Sam 10:12\)](#), JBL 83 [1964] 415–416, suggests that the name is short for \*Beth-Yahweh, which would compare with the alternance between →[Baal-meon](#) and Beth-Baal-meon). By the 14th century BCE, before the cult of Yahweh had reached Israel, groups of Edomite and Midianite nomads worshipped Yahweh as their god. These data converge with a northern tradition, found in a number of ancient theophany texts, according to which Yahweh came from →[Edom](#) and [Seir](#) ([Judg 5:4](#); note the correction in [Ps 68:8\[7\]](#)). According to the Blessing of Moses Yahweh came from Sinai, “dawned from” Seir, and “shone forth” from Mount Paran ([Deut 33:2](#)). Elsewhere he is said to have come from Teman and Mount Paran ([Hab 3:3](#)). The references to “Yahweh of Teman” in the Kuntillet ‘Ajrud inscriptions are extra-biblical confirmation of the topographical connection (M. WEINFELD, [Kuntillet ‘Ajrud Inscriptions and Their Significance](#), SEL 1 [1984] 121–130, esp. 125, 126). All of these places—Seir, Mt Paran, Teman, and Sinai—are in or near Edom.

If Yahweh was at home in the south, then, how did he make his way to the north? According to a widely accepted theory, the Kenites were the mediators of the Yahwistic cult. One of the first to advance the Kenite hypothesis was the Dutch historian of religion Cornelis P. Tiele. In 1872 TIELE characterized Yahweh historically as “the god of the desert, worshipped by the Kenites and their close relatives before the Israelites” (*Vergelijkende geschiedenis van de Egyptische en Mesopotamische godsdiensten* [Amsterdam 1872] 559). The idea was adopted and elaborated by B. STADE (*Geschichte des Volkes Israels* [1887] 130–131), and it gained considerable support ever since, also among modern scholars (see, e.g., A. J. WENSINCK, *De oorsprongen van het Jahwisme*, *Semietische Studiën uit de nalatenschap van Prof. Dr. A. J. Wensinck* [Leiden 1941] 23–50; B. D. EERDMANS, *Religion of Israel* [Leiden 1947] 15–19; H. H. ROWLEY, *From Joseph to Joshua* [London 1950] 149–160; A. H. J. GUNNEWEG, [Mose in Midian](#), ZTK 60 [1964] 1–9; W. H. SCHMIDT, *Exodus, Sinai, Wüste* (Darmstadt 1983) 110–118; WEINFELD 1987; METTINGER 1990:408–409). In its classical form the hypothesis assumes that the Israelites became acquainted with the cult of Yahweh through Moses. Moses’ father-in-law—Hobab, according to an old tradition ([Judg 1:16](#); [4:11](#); cf. [Num 10:29](#))—was a Midianite priest ([Exod 2:16](#); [3:1](#); [18:1](#)) who worshipped Yahweh (see e.g. [Exod 18:10–12](#)). He belonged to the Kenites ([Judg 1:16](#); [4:11](#)), a branch of the Midianites (H. H. ROWLEY, *From Joseph to Joshua* [London 1950] 152–153). By way of Hobab and Moses, then, the Kenites were the mediators of the cult of Yahweh.

The strength of the Kenite hypothesis is the link it establishes between different but converging sets of data: the absence of Yahweh from West-Semitic epigraphy; Yahweh’s topographical link with the area of Edom (which may be taken to include the territory of the Midianites); the ‘Kenite’ affiliation of Moses; and the positive evaluation of the Kenites in the Bible. A major flaw in the classical Kenite hypothesis, however, is its disregard for the ‘Canaanite’ origins of Israel. The view that, under the influence of Moses, the Israelites became Yahwists during their journey through the desert, and then brought their newly acquired religion to the Palestinian soil, neglects the fact that the majority of the Israelites were firmly rooted in Palestine. The historical role of Moses, moreover, is highly problematic. It seems more prudent not to put too much weight on the figure of Moses. It is only in later tradition that he came to

be regarded as the legendary ancestor of the Levitical priests and a symbol of the 'Yahweh-alone' movement; his real importance remains uncertain.

If the Kenite hypothesis is to be maintained, then, it is only in a modified form. Though it is highly plausible that the Kenites (and the Midianites and the Rechabites may be mentioned in the same breath) introduced Israel to the worship of Yahweh, it is unlikely that they did so outside the borders of Palestine. Both Kenites and Rechabites are mentioned as dwelling in North Israel at an early stage; so are the Gibeonites, who are ethnically related to the Edomites (J. BLENKINSOPP, *Gibeon and Israel* [Cambridge 1972] 14–27). Some of these groups were not permanent residents of North Israel; they came there as traders. Already in [Gen 37:28](#) Midianite traders are mentioned as being active between Palestine and Egypt (KNAUF 1988:27). If Yahwism did indeed originate with Midianites or Kenites—and the evidence seems to point in that direction—it may have been brought to Transjordan and Central Palestine by traders along the caravan routes from the south to the east (J. D. SCHLOEN, [Caravans, Kenites, and Casus belli](#), *CBQ* 55 [1993] 18–38, esp. p 36).

III. Explanations of the name Yahweh must assume that, except for the vocalisation, the traditional form is the correct one. The hypothesis which says that there were originally two divine names, viz. Yāhū and Yahweh, the former being the older one (MAYER 1958:34), is now generally abandoned in light of the epigraphic evidence (CROSS 1973:61; *pace* KLAWEK 1990:12). The significance of the name Yahweh has been the subject of a staggering amount of publications (for an impression see MAYER 1958). This “monumental witness to the industry and ingenuity of biblical scholars” (CROSS 1973:60) is hardly in proportion to the limited importance of the issue. Even if the meaning of the name could be established beyond reasonable doubt, it would contribute little to the understanding of the nature of the god. The caution against overestimating etymologies, voiced most eloquently by James Barr, holds good for divine names as well. From a perspective of the history of religion, it is much more important to know the characteristics which worshippers associated with their god, than the original meaning of the latter's name. Having said that, however, the question of the etymology of Yahweh cannot be simply dismissed. The following observations are in order.

In spite of isolated attempts to take *yhwh* as a pronominal form, meaning 'Yea He!' (from \**ya huwa*, S. MOWINCKEL, *HUCA* 32 [1958] 121–133) or 'My One' (cf. Akk *ya'u*, H. CAZELLES, *Der persönliche Gott Abrahams, Der Weg zum Menschen* FS A. Deissler [ed. R. Mosis & L. Ruppert; Freiburg 1989] 59–60), it is widely agreed that the name represents a verbal form. With the preformative *yod*, *yhwh* is a finite verbal form to be analysed as a 3rd masc. sing. imperfect. Analogous finite verbal forms used as theonyms are attested for the religion of pre-Islamic Arabs. Examples include the gods →[Ya'ūq](#) ('he protects', *WbMyth* I 479) and [Yaḡūt](#) ('he helps', *WbMyth* I 478). Much earlier are the Akkadian and Amorite instances of verbal forms used as divine names: <sup>d</sup>Ikšudum ('He has reached', ARM 13 no. 111:6) and Ešuh ('He has been victorious', H. B. HUFFMON, *Amorite Personal Names in the Mari Texts* [Baltimore 1965] 215) are just two examples (CROSS 1973: 67). Morphologically, then, the name Yahweh is not without parallels.

The interpretation of the theonym as a finite verb is already found in [Exod 3:14](#). In reply to Moses' question of what he is to say to the Israelites when they ask him which god sent him, God says: "I AM

WHO I AM”, and he adds: “Say this to the people of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you’ ”. The explanation here offered is a sophisticated play based on association: the root HWH is understood as a by-form of HYH, ‘to be’ and the prefix of the third person is understood as a secondary objectivation of a first person: *yhwh* is thus interpreted as *’hyh*, ‘I am’. Since the significance of such a name is elusive, the reconstructed name is itself the subject of a further interpretation in the phrase *’ehyeh ’ăšer ’ehyeh*, ‘I am who I am’. Its meaning is debated. Should one understand it as a promise (‘I will certainly be there’) or as an allusion to the incomparability of Yahweh (‘I am who I am’, i.e. without peer)? Even in the revelation of his name, Yahweh does not surrender himself: He cannot be captured by means of either an image or a name. The Greek translation ὁ ὢν (LXX) has philosophical overtones: it is at the basis of a profound speculation on the eternity and immutability of God—both of them ideas originally unconnected with the name Yahweh.

Since the Israelite explanation is evidently a piece of theology rather than a reliable etymology, it cannot be accepted as the last word on the matter. Comparative material from Akkadian sources has been used to make a case for the thesis that *\*yahweh* is in fact an abbreviated sentence name. Among Amorite personal names, there are a number in which a finite form of the root HWY (‘to be, to manifest oneself’) is coupled with a theonym. Examples are Yaḥwi-ilum, Yaḥwi-Adad (ARM 23, 86:7), and Ya(h)wium (= laḥwi-ilum, e.g. ARM 23, 448:13). These Amorite names are the semantic equivalent of the Akkadian name Ibašši-ilum (‘God has manifested himself’). The objection that these are all anthroponyms, whereas Yahweh is a theonym, is not decisive. Cuneiform texts also recognize a number of gods whose names are in fact a finite verbal form with a deity as subject: <sup>d</sup>Ikruḥ-Il (‘El has blessed’) and <sup>d</sup>Išmêlum (= *\*Išme-ilum*, ‘God has heard’) can be quoted in illustration. STOL has made a strong case for regarding these names as those of deified ancestors (M. STOL, [Old Babylonian Personal Names](#), *SEL* 8 [1991] 191–212, esp. 203–205).

Some scholars believe that Yahweh, too, is the abbreviated name of a deified ancestor. Thus DE MOOR construes the original name of the deity as *\*Yahweh-El*, ‘May El be present (as helper)’ (1990:237–239). In support of this speculated form he adduces the name Jacob (*Ya’ăqōb*), which is short for *Y’qb-’l*, ‘May El follow him closely’ (cf. Yaḥqub-el, H. HUFFMON, *Amorite Personal Names in the Mari Texts* [Baltimore 1965] 203–204; S. AHITUV, *Canaanite Toponyms in Ancient Egyptian Documents* [Jerusalem 1984] 200), and such names as Yaḥwi-Il in Mari texts. DE MOOR draws the conclusion that originally Yahweh was “probably the divine ancestor of one of the proto-Israelite tribes” (1990:244). Yet though theoretically possible, it is difficult to believe that the major Israelite deity, venerated in a cult that was imported into Palestine, was originally a deified ancestor. Though such gods are known, they are never found in a leading position in the pantheon. Their worship tends to remain local, as an ancestor is of necessity the ancestor of a restricted group.

There are admittedly ancient Near Eastern deities with a composite name who never were ancestors. Examples include *rkb’l* (traditionally vocalized as → [Rakib-el](#)) from Sam’al ([KA/ 24:16](#)), and Malakbel, *’Aglibol*, and Yarhibol from Palmyra. Morphologically, however, these names do not compare with a speculated *\*yahweh-DN*, since the first component of the name is a substantive. The names just mentioned are best interpreted as ‘Charioteer of El’ (cf. *TSSI* II 70), ‘Messenger of Bel’, ‘Calf of Bol’, and ‘Lord of the Source’ (cf. J. HOFTIJZER, *Religio aramaica* [Leiden 1968] 32–38; for the interpretation of the Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter Willem van der Horst, *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (Leiden; Boston; Köln; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge: Brill; Eerdmans, 1999).



name Yarhibol, cf. Akk *yarḫu*, ‘water hole, pond’, CAD I/J 325), respectively. In addition to the morphological difference with a hypothetical \*yahweh-DN, Rakib-el and his likes are names of subordinate deities; there is no example of such gods heading the pantheon.

Related to the thesis that \*yahweh is an abbreviated theonym is the suggestion that it is an abbreviation of a liturgical formula. The solution proposed by CROSS is an example. He speculates that the longer form of ‘Yahweh’ is extant in the title →Yahweh Zabaoth. The *šēbā’ôt* (transcribed as Zabaoth in many English Bible translations) are the →[host of heaven](#), i.e. the council of the gods. The name Yahweh Zabaoth is itself short for \**ḏu yahwī šaba’ôt*, ‘He who creates the (heavenly) armies’, according to CROSS (1973:70). Since in his view this is in fact a title of El, the full name might be reconstructed as \**il-ḏu-yahwī-šaba’ôt*. The analysis of Cross goes back to his teacher W. F. Albright (W. F. ALBRIGHT, [review of B. N. Wambacq, L’épithète divine Jahvé Seba’ôt](#), JBL 67 (1948) 377–381). D. N. FREEDMAN quotes from Albright’s notes for an unpublished *History of the Religion of Israel* listing a number of reconstructed cult names such as \**’ēl yahweh yīsrā’ēl*, ‘El-creates-Israel’ (on the basis of [Gen 33:20](#)) and \**’ēl yahweh rūḥôt*, ‘El-creates-the-winds’ (FREEDMAN *et al.* 1977–82:547). Instead of a reconstructed form \*yahweh-’el, then, Albright reckons with a form \*’El-yahweh—which could be complemented by various objects. DIJKSTRA, too, argues that the original form is El Yahweh, ‘El who reveals himself’—a form still reflected in such texts as [Ps 118:27](#) (M. DIJKSTRA, Yahweh-El or El-Yahweh?, “Dort ziehen Schiffe dahin ...”: collected communications to the XIVth congress of the International Organization for the Study of the Old Testament [BEATAJ 28; ed. M. Augustin & K.-D. Schunk; Frankfurt am Main etc. 1996] 43–52).

Leaving aside for the moment the problem implied in the identification of Yahweh with El, the interpretation of Yahweh as an abbreviated sentence name (and possibly a liturgical formula) is not without difficulties. Since the idea that a human ancestor could rise to the position of national god flies in the face of the comparative evidence, a presumed El-Yahweh or Yahweh-El must of necessity be a divine name followed or preceded by a verbal form characterizing the deity. By implication, then, the proper name of the god has been replaced in the Israelite tradition by a verb denoting one of his characteristic activities. Such a process is unparalleled in ancient Near Eastern religions—unless one considers such Arab deities as Yāūq and Yaǧūt, epithets of another deity, which would suggest a South Semitic rather than a West Semitic background for Yahweh. Isolated verbal forms such as proper names, however, are not uncommon in the Semitic world, as witnessed by e.g. the name \*Yagrušu of Baal’s weapon. Solving the enigma of the tetragrammaton by positing another divine name is really a last option. A solution which explains the name in the form it has come down to us is to be preferred.

A problem hitherto unmentioned is the identification of the root lying at the basis of the form *yhwh*, and that of its meaning. Though some have suggested a link with the root ḤWY, resulting in the translation ‘the Destroyer’ (e.g. H. GRESSMANN, *Mose und seine Zeit* [Göttingen 1913] 37), it is generally held that the name should be connected with the Semitic root ḤWY. Also scholars who do not regard the tetragrammaton as an abbreviated theonym usually follow the Israelite interpretation insofar they interpret Yahweh as a form of the verb ‘to be’; opinions diverge as to whether the form is basic or causative, i.e. a Qal or a Hiph’il. The one school interprets ‘He is’, i.e. ‘He manifests himself as present’, whereas the other argues in favour of a causative meaning: ‘He causes to be, calls into existence’. The first interpretation has an exponent in VON SODEN. Adducing comparative material from Akkadian Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter Willem van der Horst, *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (Leiden; Boston; Köln; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge: Brill; Eerdmans, 1999).

sources, he urges that the verb should be taken in its stronger sense 'to prove oneself, to manifest oneself, to reveal oneself' (VON SODEN 1966). A representative of the second school is ALBRIGHT. He takes \**yahweh* as a causative imperfect of the verb HWY, 'to be'. Yahweh, then, is a god who 'causes to be' or 'brings into being'. In this form, the verb is normally transitive (W. F. ALBRIGHT, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan* [London 1968] 147–149).

A major difficulty with the explanations of the name Yahweh on the basis of HWY interpreted as 'to be', however, is the fact that they explain the name of a South Semitic deity (originating from Edom, or even further south) with the help of a West-Semitic etymology (KNAUF 1984a:469). The form of the name has the closest analogues in the pre-Islamic Arab pantheon; it is natural, therefore, to look first at the possibility of an explanation on the basis of the Arabic etymology. The relevant root HWY has three meanings in Arabic: 1. to desire, be passionate; 2. to fall; 3. to blow. All three have been called upon for a satisfactory explanation of the name Yahweh. The derivation of the name Yahweh from the meaning 'to love, to be passionate', which resulted in the translation of Yahweh as 'the Passionate' (GOITEIN 1956) has made no impact on OT scholarship. Hardly more successful was the suggestion that Yahweh is 'the Speaker', also based on the link of the name with the root HWY (cf. Akk *awû*, *atmû*; BOWMAN 1944:4–5).

A greater degree of plausibility attaches to those interpretations of the name Yahweh which identify him as a storm god. Thus the name has been connected with the meaning 'to fall' (also attested in Syriac), in which case the verbal form is seen as a causative ('He who causes to fall', scil. rain, lightning, or the enemies by means of his lightning, see [BDB 218a](#)). Another suggestion is to link the name with the meaning 'to blow', said of the wind (cf. Syr *hawwē*, 'wind'). This leads to the translation "er fährt durch die Lüfte, er weht" (J. WELLHAUSEN, *Israelitische und jüdische Geschichte* [3rd ed.; Berlin 1897] 25 note 1; KNAUF 1984a:469; 1988:43–48). Especially the latter possibility merits serious consideration. In view of the south-eastern origins of the cult of Yahweh, an Arabic etymology has a certain likelihood. Also, his presumed character as a storm god contributes to explain why Yahweh could assume various of Baal's mythological exploits.

The interpretation of the name of Yahweh is not entirely devoid of meaning, then, when it comes to establishing his character. If *ywh* does indeed mean 'He blows', Yahweh is originally a storm god. Since Baal (originally an epithet of →[Hadad](#)) is of the same type, the relationship between Yahweh and Baal deserves to be analyzed more closely. In the Monarchic Era, Baal (i.e. the Baal cult) was a serious rival of Yahweh. The competition between the two gods (that is, between their respective priesthoods and prophets) was especially fierce since the promotion of the cult of the Tyrian Baal by the Omrides. Because there was no *entente* between Yahweh and Baal, Yahweh could hardly have inherited traits of a storm god from Baal. Inheritance is too peaceful a process. Yahweh's 'Baalistic' traits have a dual origin: some are his of old because he is himself a storm god, whereas others have been appropriated—or should we say confiscated—by him. Examples of the latter include the designation of Mount →[Zion](#) as 'the recesses of →[Zaphon](#)' ([Ps 48:3](#)), the motif of Yahweh's victory over Yam (→[Sea](#); for a thorough study see J. DAY, *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea: Echoes of A Canaanite myth in the Old Testament* [Cambridge 1985]) and →[Mot](#) (W. HERRMANN, [Jahwes Triumph über Mot](#), *UF* 11 [1979] 371–377), and the Baal epithet of →[Rider upon the Clouds](#)'.

Owing to the emphasis on the conflict between Yahweh and Baal, it is insufficiently realized that Yahweh himself, too, is “a deity who is originally conceived in the categories of the Hadad type” (METTINGER 1990:410). According to the theophany texts, the earth trembles, clouds drop water, and mountains quake at the appearance of Yahweh ([Judg 5:4–5](#)). Though such a response of the elements to Yahweh’s manifestation need not imply that he is a storm-god, the latter hypothesis offers the most natural explanation. When Yahweh comes to the rescue of his beloved, he is hidden all around by darkness, thick clouds dark with water being his canopy ([Ps 18:12\[11\]](#)). As he lifts his voice the thunder resounds ([Ps 18:14\[13\]](#)). Like Baal, Yahweh is perceived as ‘a god of the mountains’ ([1 Kgs 20:23](#)), a characterization presumably triggered by the association of the weather-god with clouds hovering above the mountain tops.

Though few scholars would contest the fact that Yahweh has certain traits normally ascribed to Baal, it is often argued that originally he was much more like El than like Baal. In the patriarchal narratives of Genesis, El names such as →[El Olam](#) and →[El Elyon](#) are frequently used as epithets of Yahweh. Various scholars have drawn the conclusion that El and Yahweh were identified at a rather early stage. This identification is sometimes explained by assuming that Yahweh is originally an El figure (thus, e.g. H. NIEHR, *Der höchste Gott* [BZAW 190; Berlin/New York 1990] 4–5). CROSS has argued that Yahweh is originally a hypocoristicon of a liturgical title of El. Yahweh Zabaoth, allegedly meaning ‘He who calls the heavenly armies into being’, is not a name but an epithet. According to CROSS, the god to whom it applies in the first place is El, since El is known in the Ugaritic texts as the father of the gods. The latter are conventionally referred to as ‘the sons of El’ (CROSS 1973). DE MOOR, who also holds that Yahweh is an abbreviated sentence name originally belonging to a human being, links Yahweh with El as well. Though \*Yahweh-El was the name of an ancestor, the deified ancestor was also “an aspect of El” (DE MOOR 1990:244). In order to solve the apparent contradiction, DE MOOR explains that the deified kings of Ugarit, who ‘joined’ (*šrk*, [KTU 1.15 v:17](#)) El at their death, merged with the god (1990:242).

Speculations about the original identity of Yahweh with El need to be critically examined, however. There are problems concerning both the nature of the identification, and the divine type to which Yahweh belongs. It is insufficiently realised that, at the beginning of the Iron Age, El’s role had become largely nominal. The process of El’s retreat in favour of Dagan (the major god at Ebla in the late third millennium) and later Baal (the major god at Ugarit in the middle of the second millennium) had long been under way. By the beginning of the Iron Age, the cult of El survived in some border zones of the Near East. In most regions, however, including Palestine, El’s career as a living god (i.e. as a cultic reality and an object of actual devotion) had ended; he survived in such expressions as ‘*dt-’l*’ (‘the council of El’) and *bny-’l* (‘sons of El’, i.e. gods), but this was a survival only in name. This fact explains why there are no traces of polemics against El in the Hebrew Bible. It can therefore be argued that the smooth identification of El as Yahweh was based, not on an identity of character, but on El’s decay. His name was increasingly used either as a generic noun meaning ‘god’ or, more specifically, as a designation of the personal god. In both cases, Yahweh could be called ‘*ēl*’ (on the identification of Yahweh and El see VAN DER TOORN 1996:320–328).

Along with the name, Yahweh inherited various traits of El. One of them is divine eternity. Ugaritic texts call El the ‘father of years’ (*ab šnm*) and depict him as a bearded patriarch; Yahweh, on the other

Karel van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter Willem van der Horst, *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (Leiden; Boston; Köln; Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge: Brill; Eerdmans, 1999).



hand, is called the →‘[Ancient of days](#)’, and also is wearing a beard ([Dan 7:9–14, 22](#)). Like El, Yahweh presides over the →[council](#) of the gods. Compassion is another common trait: El is said to be compassionate (*dpid*), whereas Yahweh is called “merciful and gracious” ([Exod 34:6](#); for these and other similarities see M. SMITH, *The Early History of God* [San Francisco 1990] 7–12). In some biblical passages, the parallels are consciously explored. Thus GREENFIELD has shown that [Deut 32:6–7](#) applies to Yahweh various motifs and images originally associated with El. El (here Yahweh) is said to be Israel’s ‘father’ and ‘creator’; he is ‘wise’ and ‘eternal’ and has lived for ‘the years of many generations’ (J. C. GREENFIELD, *The Hebrew Bible and Canaanite Literature, The Literary Guide to the Bible* [ed. R. Alter & F. Kermode; Cambridge, Mass. 1987] 545–560, esp. 554).

An aspect of Yahweh that may be traced back to El, though only with great caution, is his solar appearance. Even though the theophany texts depict Yahweh primarily as a warrior storm-god, there are elements in their description which seem to assume that Yahweh is a solar deity. The Psalm of Habakkuk mentions God’s ‘splendour’ (*hōd*), and possibly his ‘shine’ (*tēhillâ*, v [3](#)); God’s appearance comes with brightness (*nōgah*) and rays of light (*qarnayim*, v [4](#)). Likewise [Deut 33:2](#) speaks about Yahweh ‘shining forth’ (ZRH) and lightning up (YP’, hiphil; for the terminology cf. F. SCHNUTENHAUS, [Das Kommen und Erscheinen Gottes im Alten Testament](#), ZAW 76 [1964] 1–22, esp. 8–10). The closest extrabiblical parallel is found in a Hebrew text from Kuntillet ‘*Ajrud*, in which the mountains are said to melt when El shines forth (*wbzh.ʾl* [...] *wymśn hrm*, “when El shines forth [...] the mountains melt”; M. WEINFELD, [Kuntillet ‘Ajrud Inscriptions and Their Significance](#), SEL 1 [1984] 121–130, esp. 126; S. AĦITUV, *Handbook of Ancient Hebrew Inscriptions* [Jerusalem 1992] 160–162). Also outside the theophany tradition there is evidence of Yahweh as a solar god. Thus the word ‘*ôr*, →‘[light](#)’, is sometimes used as a divine title ([Ps 139:11](#), cf. J. HOLMAN, [Analysis of the Text of Ps 139](#), BZ 14 [1970] 37–71, esp. 56–58; for other solar language applied to Yahweh see M. SMITH, *The Early History of God* [San Francisco 1990] 115–124, Ch. 4: Yahweh and the Sun [but cf. the review by S. B. PARKER, *Hebrew Studies* 33 (1992) 158–162]; J. G. TAYLOR, *Yahweh and the Sun* [Sheffield 1993]).

A further link between El and Yahweh is the identity of their consort. Texts from Kuntillet ‘*Ajrud* and Khirbet el-Qom refer to Yahweh ‘and his →[Asherah](#)’ (*w’šrth*). Though several scholars argue that this ‘Asherah’ is merely a cult symbol or a designation for ‘sanctuary’ (cf. Akk *aširtu*), the interpretation of the word as a divine name is to be preferred (*pace* J. A. EMERTON, [New Light on Israelite Religion: The Implications of the Inscriptions from Kuntillet ‘Ajrud](#), ZAW 94 [1982] 2–20; see M. DIETRICH & O. LORETZ, *Jahweh und seine Aschera* [UBL 9; Neukirchen-Vluyn 1992] 82–103). In the light of these data, the suggestion to emendate אֲשֶׁרֶת in [Deut 33:2e](#) into אֲשֶׁרֶת (‘and at his right hand Asherah’; H. S. NYBERG, [Deuteronomium 33:2–3](#), ZDMG 92 [1938] 320–344, esp. 335; see also M. WEINFELD, SEL 1 [1984] 121–130, esp. 124) remains a distinct possibility. Since Asherah is traditionally the consort of El in the Ugaritic texts, the pairing of Yahweh and Asherah suggests that Yahweh had taken the place of El (cf. M. DIJKSTRA, El, YHWH, and their Asherah: On Continuity and Discontinuity in Canaanite and Ancient Israelite Religion, *Ugarit: Ein ostmediterranes Kulturzentrum im Alten Orient* [ALASP 7; ed. M. Dietrich & O. Loretz; Münster 1995] 43–73, who finds here confirmation for the view that Yahweh is a particularized form of El).

Under northern influence, Yahweh came also to be paired with →[Anat](#), possibly to be identified with the →[Queen of Heaven](#) mentioned in [Jer 7:18](#); [44:17](#), [18](#), [19](#), [25](#). Her link with Yahweh is evident from the name Anat-Yahu, attested in Aramaic texts from the Jewish colony at Elephantine (VAN DER TOORN 1992). Considering the fact that the only other male deities with whom Anat is paired are Baal and →[Bethel](#) (the deified baetylon, cf. also Sikkānu [‘stone stela’, Ug *skn*], a theonym surviving in the name Sanchunjathon = [סכניתן](#)), no influence from the cult or mythology of El is apparent here.

Though Yahweh was known and worshipped among the Israelites before 1000 BCE, he did not become the national god until the beginning of the monarchic era. Due to the religious politics of Saul, Yahweh became the patron deity of the Israelite state (VAN DER TOORN 1993:531–536; 1996:266–286). As David and Solomon inherited and enlarged Saul’s kingdom, they acknowledged the position of Yahweh as national god. David brought the ark of Yahweh from Benjamin to Jerusalem ([2 Sam 6](#)); Solomon sought the blessing of Yahweh at the sanctuary of Gibeon, the national temple of the Saulide state ([1 Kgs 3:4](#); VAN DER TOORN 1993:534–535). Evidence of the predominant role of Yahweh in the official cult during the Monarchic Era are the theophoric personal names, both the biblical and the epigraphical ones. The divine name Yahweh is by far the most common theophoric element (J. H. TIGAY, *You Shall Have No Other Gods: Israelite Religion in the Light of Hebrew Inscriptions* [Atlanta 1986]; S. I. L. NORIN, *Seine Name allein ist hoch. Das Jhw-haltige Suffix althebräischer Personennamen* [Malmö 1986]; J. D. FOWLER, *Theophoric Personal Names in Ancient Hebrew. A Comparative Study* [Sheffield 1988]).

The practical monolatry of Yahweh should not be taken for a strict monotheism. Not only did the Israelites continue to recognize the existence of deities besides Yahweh, they also knew more than one Yahweh. Though at the mythological level there is only one, the cultic reality reflected a plurality of Yahweh gods (MCCARTER 1987:139–143). Extrabiblical evidence from Kuntillet ‘Ajrud mentions a ‘Yahweh of Samaria’ and a ‘Yahweh of Teman’; it is possible that the two names designate one god, viz. the official god of the northern kingdom (‘Samaria’, after its capital). Yet the recognition of a northern Yahweh is mirrored by the worship of a Yahweh of Hebron and a Yahweh of Zion. Though the constructions *bēḥebrôn* and *bēṣiyyôn* are normally translated ‘in Hebron’ and ‘in Zion’, a comparison of the name Milkashtart (‘Milku of Ashtart’) with the expression *mlk b’ttrt* (‘Milku in Ashart’) suggests that such expressions as *ywhw bēṣiyyôn* ([Ps 99:2](#)) and *ywhw bēḥebrôn* ([2 Sam 15:7](#)) should be understood as references to local forms of Yahweh (M. L. BARRE, *The God-List in the Treaty between Hannibal and Philip V of Macedonia* [Baltimore/London 1983] 186 note 473; cf. [1 Sam 5:5](#) *Dāgôn bē’ašdôd*, ‘Dagan of Ashdod’). The religious situation in early Israel, therefore, was not merely one of polytheism, but also of poly-Yahwism. The Deuteronomic emphasis on the unity of Yahweh (→[One](#)) must be understood against this background.

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