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El, Yahweh, and Elohim: The Evolution of God in Israel and its Theological Implications

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Abstract
It is often taken for granted today that the differing terms for God in the Hebrew Bible function as synonyms, although, originally, not all terminology used for God referred to the same deity. This article provides an overview of the terms El, Yahweh, and Elohim, which are all equated today, and a hypothetical reconstruction of when these terms came to prominence in Ancient Israel. After plotting and considering the contribution of each term to the development of monotheism in Israel, which ultimately laid the foundation for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the following analysis considers some of the ensuing implications for communities of faith today when relating to their differing faith traditions.

Keywords
Monotheism, El, Yahweh, Elohim, Israelite religion, God of Israel

Introduction

It is often taken for granted today that the differing terms for the Divine in the Hebrew Bible function as synonyms, although, originally, not all terms used for God referred to the same deity or implied uniform understandings of the Divine. There is much more than meets the eye with the terms El, translated into English as God, Yahweh, translated as the Lord, and Elohim, also translated as God. These terms are all essentially equated today. A diachronic elucidation that examines when these differing terms came into prominence in Israel provides an evolutionary schema for the understanding of how the conceptualization of God evolved in ancient Israel. It also reveals the contribution each term provided in regard to the development of monotheism in Israel, which would ultimately lay the foundation for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Undoubtedly, the terminology for God overlapped at times but, at different times in the history of Israel, differing understandings of God arose and such differences are reflected in the terminology used for God. A brief overview of these three names—El, Yahweh, and Elohim—illustrates the historical evolution of God in Israel.

El

El was the head of the pantheon in and around the Southern Levant (Palestine falls within the confines of this region) in the Bronze Age. El

presided over the West-Semitic pantheon, as revealed by the texts from Ugarit in modern-day Syria and by finds from Palestine. El's consort was Asherah, and Baal his subordinate. Some passages in the Patriarchal narratives in Genesis (for instance Genesis 17:1) also indicate that El was the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The term El is accompanied by an epithet that describes the numen, such as El Shaddai (God Almighty) or El Elyon (God Most High). Although the final version of the Patriarchal narratives, as they are found in Genesis, were composed as late as the Persian era, the grand narrative sequence outlined in the Hebrew Bible presents some surprisingly accurate memories of religions in the Levant well before the monarchic eras in Israel and Judah in the Bronze Age. The distant past in which the biblical editors set the Patriarchs, the Bronze Age in modern parlance, preserves the memory of El worship at the end of the second millennium BCE. Irrespective of the historicity of the biblical patriarchal figures and of the date of the final compilation of their stories, extrabiblical evidence confirms El's prominence in the Bronze Age. This does not preclude the fact that El continued to be worshiped for quite some time in Israel, even into Persian and Hellenistic times. According to Exodus 6:2–3, the Patriarchs were not revealed the name Yahweh: "Elohim also spoke to Moses and said to him: 'I am Yahweh. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as El Shaddai, but by my name Yahweh I did not make myself known to them.'" Yet, in the narratives as we have them, each Patriarch does address his God as Yahweh. This discrepancy can be explained by source criticism. As textual and artifactual remains show that El continued to be venerated into the Iron Age and even into the Persian and Hellenistic era, late biblical editors sought to legitimate Yahweh worship by anchoring it back into ancient times, to the days of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They thus put the name Yahweh into the mouths of each patriarch despite the claim in Exodus 6:3 that they did not know that name. As social memories imply levels of fuzziness, the anachronic mention of Yahweh in Genesis was not considered problematic by ancient readers and writers.[1] Nevertheless. the anachronism is a precious hint as to the awareness of the creators of the periodization of Israel's past that Yahweh was not always worshipped under that name.

From the name Israel itself the biblical writers could deduce that the original God of Israel was El. The theophoric element in the name Israel is El, not Yahu or Yah. The people who worship Yahweh are not referred to as IsraYah, IsraYahu or IsraYahweh. Thus, many scholars have logically argued that El was the original God of Israel.[2]

Hence, Exodus 6:2–3 simply equates El with Yahweh, stating that the Patriarchs worshipped Yahweh all along without knowing it, though they knew Him by a different name. The modern implications of the notion that the same god takes on different names are discussed in the conclusion below.

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[1] On fuzziness, see Ehud Ben Zvi, 'Exploring the Memory of Moses The Prophet in Late Persian/Early Hellenistic Yehud/Judah', in D. V. Edelman and E. Ben Zvi (eds), *Remembering Biblical Figures in the Late Persian and Early Hellenistic Periods* (Oxford: OUP, 2013), 335–64, on 363.

[2] Meindert Dijkstra, 'El, the God of Israel—Israel, the People of YHWH: On the Origins of Ancient Israelite Yahwism', in B. Becking and M. Dijkstra (eds), *Only One God? Monotheism in Ancient Israel and the Veneration of the Goddess Asherah* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 81–126; Mark Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 32; Mark Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (Oxford: OUP, 2001); Mark Smith, *The Memoirs of God: History, Memory, and the Experience of the Divine in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2004), 142–5. Although it has been suggested the term "Israel" is evidenced early on in Mesopotamia, it is doubtful it makes an appearance prior to the Late Bronze Age, on the Merneptah Stele in Egypt. References or apparent attestations of Israel and Yahweh prior to the Iron Age in the Levant are not conclusive.

Yahweh

According to Exodus 3:14, the proper name of the God of the Israelites is Yahweh but this name was only first revealed to Moses. Historically, however, Yahweh's relationship to El needs to be defined. Regarding the origins of Yahweh, there is some debate over the two positions: either Yahweh hypostasized or grew out as an epithet for El,[3] or Yahweh was a separate deity who merged with the deity El.[4] Both are possible. Yahweh could have grown out of an epithet for El and secondarily merged back into El. It is also likely that Yahweh originated in the South, somewhere around Edom south of what would constitute Israel and Judah.[5]

In line with Exodus 6:3, the Melchizedek story conflates Yahweh and El when Aram swears to "Yahweh El Elyon, maker of heaven and earth"(Genesis 14:22). The title "maker of heaven and earth" resembles the epithet "god of heaven" that comes to prominence during the Persian era, as is explained in what follows. The relationship between El and Yahweh discussed here is not unique, for in antiquity gods frequently merged, were equated or split apart or hypostasized,[6] which is to say there is ample precedent for gods merging and splitting off. Thus, Ahura Mazda, the head deity of the Persians, was a composite deity himself worshipped alongside other gods.[7]

Recent years have witnessed scholars arguing that the term 'Yahweh' grows out of an Arabic root meaning "to blow", which describes the function of a storm god, and many think Yahweh originally was conceived of in such a manner.[8] This further fits well with the idea of Yahweh originating in the South, as the Midianite or Kenite hypothesis suggests, for Arab groups were nomadic and inhabited southern regions. Although Yahweh is attested in texts from Egypt that suggest a people group of Yahweh existing in the South in the Bronze Age,[9] no unambiguous attestation of the god exists until the Iron Age and it comes from the Southern Levant, referenced on the Mesha Stele.[10] Thus, Yahweh comes to the fore and then becomes the head God of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah during in the Iron Age. El was the name of the god of Israel in the Bronze Age and Yahweh becomes the proper name of the god of the Israelites in the Iron Age. Israelites at this time began to understand Yahweh to be their head god, though many would have also continued to know him under the name El; thus, Yahweh-El was understood by Israelites to be their god in the Iron Age and even into the present among more than just descendants of Israel today. In what follows it will be seen that the Persian era expands the understanding of this God among Israelites and the heirs of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah in the Persian Yehud period[11] by the addition of another name for

[3] Frank Moor Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 60–75.

[4] John Day, *Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 13–17; Mark S. Smith, *God in Translation: Deities in Cross-Cultural Discourse in the Biblical World* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 96–8.

[5] See James S. Anderson, *Monotheism and Yahweh's Appropriation of Baal* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 100–2.

[6] On gods merging in the ancient world, see W. G. Lambert, 'The Historical Development of the Mesopotamian Pantheon: A Study in Sophisticated Polytheism', in H. Goedicke and J. J. M. Roberts (eds), *Unity and Diversity: Essays in the History, Literature, and Religion of the Ancient Near East* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1975), 193; Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture, and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth* (New York: Free Press, 1992), 86; Niels Peter Lemche, *Ancient Israel: A New History of Israelite Society* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988), 228; Smith, *God in Translation*.

[7] On the likelihood that Ahura Mazda represents a composited deity, see John M. Cook, *The Persian Empire* (London: The Chaucer Press, 1983), 146–57, on 147 for the discussion of the triad of Ahura Mazda, Anahita, and Mithra.

[8] Bibliography in Anderson, *Monotheism*, 101, n. 10.

[9] See Anderson, *Monotheism*, 100–2.

[10] See J. Andrew Dearman, *Studies in the Mesha Inscription and Moab* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1989).

[11] 'Yehud' is the Aramaic term for the Persian province that comprised Jerusalem and its surroundings.

God that carries rich theological implications to be incorporated into the mix.

Elohim

In the Persian era, the term 'Elohim' comes to the fore. The curious use of Elohim in the Hebrew Bible begins with the third word of Genesis 1, "When at first Elohim created…" Literally, Elohim is the plural form of El. Translating 'Elohim' as "God" in the singular is correct because the verb 'created' in Genesis 1:1 and elsewhere is conjugated in the third person singular "He created".[12]

Rather than perceiving the Trinity in the use of the term Elohim, it is more appropriate to view it as a plural of majesty, which does not preclude understanding Elohim as encompassing or subsuming all gods under this designation.[13] Technically plural, though translated as a singular, Elohim is a faithful reflection of the kind of monotheism current in the Persian era.

Konrad Schmid recently argued that the Priestly source synthesizes traditions that had different conceptions of God, the traditions of Elism represented in the Patriarchal narratives and a Mosaical tradition that provided the proper, divine name of God.[14] According to Schmid, the Priestly source, or Priestly document (depending on whether P is considered only as one of the sources of the Pentateuch or as a complete narrative that provided the narrative thread of the Primary History from Creation to Israel's settlement in Canaan), uses the term Elohim to encompass the names of other deities and is thus representative of inclusive monotheism.[15] Though scholars are jumping ship and abandoning Wellhausen's source criticism hypothesis, P remains a valid hypothesis as a source thanks to its peculiar style, its propensity to lists, its chronology, and a theological profile that makes it easy to follow through the Pentateuch and even into the Book of Joshua.[16]

It is during the Persian era that P equated Yahweh with Elohim. Schmid also writes that the Priestly source makes a

> decision to consider a category as a proper noun. If the only God *coincides* with the category "gods," then it is a logical consequence that all the other gods are included in this notion of God (capitalized). Others may venerate him as Zeus or Ahuramazda, but actually, it is just God.[17]

There were precursors in the West Semitic milieu for a phenomenon in which a term usually rendered "god" in the singular and when made plural continued to mean "god" in the singular.[18] Thus, there is some precedent for the use of a plural abstract being understood as a god in the singular. There could have been instances of this in Israel with the term Elohim, though it does not seem to be used in such a manner as a plural term denoting a singular god in Israel until the Priestly Source of the Hebrew Bible. Even if it did occur earlier, it does not mean that the term Elohim took on the meaning of the head god encompassing all others prior to the Persian era when a radical change in the conceptualization of the divine realm occurs. Thus, the term Elohim takes on the understanding of God in the singular under Persian hegemony and becomes prominent as a divine title for

[12] Karel van der Toorn, 'God (I) אלהים', in K. van der Toorn, B. Becking and P. W. van der Horst (eds) *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 352.

[13] Anderson, *Monotheism*, 184.

[14] Konrad Schmid, 'The Quest for 'God': Monotheistic Arguments in the Priestly Texts of the Hebrew Bible', in B. Pongratz-Leisten (ed.), *Reconsidering the Concept of Revolutionary Monotheism*, (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 271–89.

[15] Schmid, 'Quest', 289.

[16] For the Priestly source evidencing this phenomenon in the Persian era, see Philippe Guillaume, *Land and Calendar: The Priestly Document from Genesis 1 to Joshua 18* (New York: T&T Clark, 2009).

[17] Schmid, 'Quest', 285.

[18] See Joel Burnett, *A Reassessment of Biblical Elohim* (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2001).

the head God and synonym for Yahweh under Achemenid rule in the Southern Levant. This coheres with what is known about the Persians and their head god, Ahura Mazda.

Diana Edelman argues there was a significant change in the conceptualization of the divine realm at this time. According to Edelman, the major change in the way the divine realm was understood was the result of the collapse of the Judahite pantheon and that the emergence of the concept of Elohim reflects the new abstract godhead.[19] This development marks a shift in the conceptualization of the divine realm and the rise of an inclusive type of monotheism.[20]

During this time Yahweh was positioned as a manifestation of Ahura Mazda, the god of the Persian Empire, perhaps a pragmatic move allowing greater ease for the function of the cult in Yehud.[21] Naturally, the emergence of empires in the Near East would have caused syncretism among gods to some extent, as conquerors such as the Persians would have wanted to equate their gods, for political and possibly economic reasons, with those of conquered vassal kingdoms.[22] The rise of empires would have led to a decrease in the number of deities perceived in the divine realm, leading towards what we understand today as monotheism. This was one factor and precursor towards monotheism and an impetus for the ascendancy of Elohim, a process reflected in Second Isaiah:

> If the political dimension of the vision of the poems is consonant with Persian policy of the economic and political revival of Yehud, and the role of Jerusalem as the center of the cult of Yahweh the universal god consistent with Persian religious policy, then we may reasonably suggest that the presentation of Yahweh as aniconic is part of that development whereby the old local deity, probably still worshipped in Jerusalem during the sixth century, becomes identified with the high god of the Persian empire, elsewhere known under the names of Marduk and Ahuramazda. The latter, as is known, was worshipped aniconically (as opposed to Anahita).[23]

The old local deity would have been Yahweh Sabaoth (the Lord of Hosts),[24] and the new deity equated with the head deity of the empire of that time was Yahweh-Elohim.[25]

Yahweh's epithet in Ezra-Nehemiah, "god of heaven," (אלהי השמים, *elohey-hashamaym*) is known to have been one for Ahura Mazda, which argues in favor of scribes consciously equating Yahweh with Ahura Mazda during the Persian era.[26]

Through the use of the term Elohim, Ahura Mazda could more easily be equated with Yahweh. This equation is likely to have made the Persians predisposed toward allowing the

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[19] Diana Edelman, 'Introduction', in D. V. Edelman (ed.), *The Triumph of Elohim: From Yahwisms to Judaism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 22–3.

[20] Thomas L. Thompson, 'The Intellectual Matrix of Early Biblical Narrative: Inclusive Monotheism in Persian Period Palestine', in Edelman (ed.), *The Triumph of Elohim*, 107–24 and the comments by Edelman, 'Introduction', 22.

[21] Philip R. Davies, *On the Origins of Judaism* (London: Equinox, 2011), 98.

[22] Diana Edelman, 'From Prophets to Prophetic Books: Fixing the Divine Word', in E. Ben Zvi and D. V. Edelman (eds), *The Production of Prophecy: Constructing Prophecy and Prophets in Yehud* (London: Equinox, 2009), 29–54; Smith, *God in Translation*.

[23] Philip R. Davies, 'God of Cyrus, God of Israel: Some Religio-Historical Reflections on Isaiah 40–55', in J. Davis, G. Harvey, and W. G. E. Watson (eds), *Words Remembered, Texts Renewed: Essays in Honour of John F. A. Sawyer* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 223.

[24] This descriptive for Yahweh, namely Sabaoth or of Hosts, is likely an early descriptor of Yahweh. It suggests an entourage or council of sorts. Elohim joined or equated with Yahweh would have been a later, Persian era development as argued here.

[25] On this, see Diana Edelman, 'God Rhetoric: Reconceptualizing YHWH Sebaot as YHWH Elohim in the Hebrew Bible', in E. Ben Zvi, D. V. Edelman and F. Polak (eds), *A Palimpsest: Rhetoric, Ideology, Stylistics, and Language Relating to Persian Israel* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2009), 93–120.

[26] See Thomas M. Bolin, 'The Temple of יהו at Elephantine and Persian Religious Policy', in Edelman (ed.), *The Triumph of Elohim*, 127–42.

rebuilding of a temple in Jerusalem, as it served as a financial and storage institution bringing benefit to the empire, especially in staging efforts for military forays into Egypt. The priestly-elite in Jerusalem championed Yahweh-Elohim over and against the older conceptions, which understood El or Yahweh as the top God of Israel. Now the equation was Elohim = El +Yahweh + Ahura Mazda + all other gods. This was indeed an innovation in terms of the history of ideas.

The change in the conceptualization of the pantheon under the Persians gave rise to an inclusive sort of monotheism that went well beyond what had occurred earlier, for instance when the closing lines of late versions of Enuma Elish describe other gods as mere aspects of Marduk or when Ninurta and even Assur in Assyria were described in similar ways.[27] However elaborate these monotheistic precursors were, it is the Hebrew Bible, with its use of the term Elohim, that laid the foundation for the monotheism to which the three great monotheistic religions today are indebted.

Implications for Today

Today we understand the terms El, Yahweh, and Elohim and their derivatives to be synonyms. Originally they were distinct deities that were eventually merged into one, as was common practice in antiquity. This does not in any way diminish our traditions inherited from the Hebrew Bible, but rather, makes them richer, revealing that it takes a plethora of images and names to begin to render justice to the Transcendent. If God does not change, our understanding of God does. The manner in which God is conceived continues to evolve today. As much as Exodus 6:3 explains that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob did not know Yahweh, thus revealing how the understating of God progressed, our own grasp of the divine is bound to evolve.

This view might go a long way in helping faith communities conceptualize differing faith traditions today. That the Lord or God of Israel was known by different names and yet was shown to be the same god is informative for our age. Differing faith traditions today, as in the past, call upon God by different names. This diversity implies that no one has all the answers except God. As no human language can render justice to who God is, humility is required. Each one should acknowledge the possibility of God's revelation in faith traditions other than one's own, especially in light of issues today and the current volatile political and religious climate, notably the situation with violent groups in Islam, in Christianity, and in Judaism. This short overview of some of the stages in Israel's understanding of its God suggests that God is not to be confined to the theology of one group at one particular time and that other faith traditions should not be rejected out of hand. El was indeed worshipped throughout the Levant, notably at Ugarit, by groups other than Israel.

When one looks at Hinduism and its schools of thought, it becomes apparent that this religious tradition displays a theology that all the gods are aspects or avatars of Brahman, at least amongst the elite, for this numen is thought to be

[27] A Late Babylonian text currently housed at the British Museum reads: Uras (is) Markuk of planting; Lugalidda (is) Marduk of the abyss; Ninurta (is) Marduk of the pick-axe; Nergal (is) Marduk of battle; Zababa (is) Marduk of warfare; Enlil (is) Marduk of lordship and consultations; Nabu (is) Marduk of accounting; Sin (is) Marduk who lights up the night; Samas (is) Marduk of justice; Adad (is) Marduk of rain; Tispak (is) Marduk of troops; Great Anu (is) Marduk of…; Suqamuna (is) Marduk of the container; […(is)] Marduk of everything. On this text, see W. G. Lambert, 'The Historical Development of the Mesopotamian Pantheon: A Study in Sophisticated Polytheism', in H. Goedicke and J. J. M. Roberts (eds), *Unity & Diversity: Essays in the History, Literature, and Religion of the Ancient Near East* (Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1975), 198. More examples in Smith, *God in Translation*, 170–5. Smith notes that the ending of the Neo-Babylonian version of *Enuma Elish* suggests that the names of other deities are aspects of Marduk; that is, they only exist because of the one Marduk. Marduk seems to be one of the paramount divinities by which this growing movement toward monotheism expresses itself. Ninurta is another. Yahweh's ascendancy also entailed the appropriation of other deities' domains: see Anderson, *Monotheism*. On the deity Aššur subsuming other gods in Assyria, see S. Parpola, 'Monotheism in Ancient Assyria', *Transactions of the Casco Bay Assyriological Institute* 1 (2000): 165–209.

the force behind everything, as the Upanishads articulate.[28] Thus, "most Hindus, intellectuals and commoners alike will assent to the same theological understanding that avers that 'ultimately all the gods are one'".[29] Some African tribal and Native American religions express themselves similarly at times.[30] In Christianity the one God is understood to be manifest in three: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This notion of a deity manifesting in different ways, albeit in the same tradition in these instances, is a helpful way to view other traditions and their corresponding notions of God in relation to one's own, as is the case with understanding ancient Israel's progression when it comes to their view of God. Thus, theologically speaking, it takes all of these different views of the divine to begin to conceive of the Transcendent. Such an inclusive, humble understanding allows for greater tolerance amongst faith traditions and a curbing of violence that flows from perceiving those of other religions as outsiders and as not falling under the domain and care of God, or the name they call upon God, be it Yahweh, Allah, or Jesus. In regard to Israel and the Hebrew Bible, one should recall that the book of Jonah makes the point that God cares for all of humanity, even the hated Assyrians.

Inevitably, our understanding of God is a reflection of our ideas, as we can only conceive God in terms we know and understand, in categories with which we are familiar. We finite human beings often desire to put God in a box, but God is always bigger than one thinks—God is infinite. Granted, certain subgroups of virtually every religious tradition believe or articulate their respective tradition as possessing the fullness of faith or a more accurate faith and conceptualization of the Divine than another, but that does not imply God does not care for the adherents of other faith traditions, regardless of how different they are, how they conceive of God, or the name by which they call God.

In the 4th century of the Common Era, St Jerome explained that religion is the one subject on which everyone presumes to be an expert.[31] Jerome would likely have agreed it is the one subject on which none of us truly are an expert, as it deals with that which is beyond what one can ever fully grasp with a finite mind.

[28] For example, the Mandukya Upanishad, which in verse 2 expresses the idea that all is Brahman. Chhāndogya Upanishad 3.14.1 reads, "All that we see in the world is Brahman." Conversely, there are many Hindus who believe that Brahman was birthed by the deity Vishnu, and that it is Vishnu who is the top god, but he is understood by many as frequently being worshipped via his avatars such as Krishna. For a Hindu text that portrays Krishna in a monotheistic manner, one should see the Bhagavad-Gita from the larger epic Mahabharata. For this one can see the chapter entitled "The Universal Manifestation", in Yogi Ramacharaka, *The Bhagavad Gite or The Message of the Master*, rev. edn (Chicago, IL: Yogi Publication Society, 1930), 110–22.

[29] See John L. Esposito, Darrell J. Fasching, and Todd Lewis, *World Religions Today* (New York: OUP, 2002), 296.

[30] N. Fox, 'Concepts of God in Israel and the Question of Monotheism', in G. Beckman and T. Lewis (eds), *Text, Artifact and Image: Revealing Ancient Israelite Religion* (Providence, RI: Brown Judaic Studies, 2006), 328.

[31] See Burton L. Visotzky, *Reading the Book: Making the Bible a Timeless Text* (New York: Schocken Books, 1996), 2.