

Non Imprimatur

**On the Death of God.
Reflections on His Life and *Post-mortem* Future**

by
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Similar to generic dying god stories typical to agrarian cultures, announcements of the death of a God in the western world may also perhaps be seen to follow cycles. A first important announcement occurred in the mid-first century, at sea off the western coast of Greece, with the proclamation that the Great God Pan was dead.¹ Some believe this moment marked the beginning of the end of the pagan era. The announcement was heard a second time, in the late 19th century, when Nietzsche's Zarathustra, returning into the world of men from a self-imposed exile, encounters a holy man in the wood worshipping, says the *Heiliger*, "the God who is my God"-- a statement that leaves Zarathustra wondering at the fact that this holy man had not heard in his woods that God is dead. Nietzsche mitigates the matter-of-fact flatness of Zarathustra's wonder by also composing an exalted, quasi-mystical dirge in the now-famous madman story from the *Gay Science*.

God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?²

Many have been the assertions of 'god is dead', and sundry the variations on the theme: from the 'flight of the gods', the "Entflozene Götter", of Hölderlin,³ to the contemporary God is Dead movement in America; it seems, however, that there is always hidden within the very language of the assertion another proposition: namely, that the gods, and especially the God that surfaced in the theological traditions of the Christians, once existed. More philosophically oriented than the German romantics and their 'gods', the high priests of the Death of God movement offer up the death of the Christian God not by talking about "Him", but rather, by talking about how humans seem to have transcended the need, interest, or even the possibility, of Him.⁴

¹ Plutarch, *Moralia* V, 17, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.

² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. W. Kaufmann, Random House, 1991, section 108, New Struggles, in section 125, The Madman; cf. section 343, The Meaning of our Cheerfulness.

³ Friedrich Hölderlin, *Germanien*, in *Sämtliche Werke, Briefe, Dokumente in zeitlicher Folge*, Band X, hrsg. Von D.E. Sattler, Bremer Ausgabe, München: Luchterhand Literaturverlag, 2004, 239.

⁴ Hamilton and Altizer's list of 10 possible interpretations for 'god is dead' (*Radical Theology and the Death of God*, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1966:x-xi), can be reduced to 3

So what has been at issue in this recent Death of God tradition, it would seem, is really not (the) Deity, but rather the human (lack of) interest story.

One of the more provocative modern scholars to take up the standard in tracking this idea, and making a surprisingly favorable pro-Christian argument, is Professor Georg Picht in his essay entitled “The God of the Philosophers.” Following the evidentiary tracks through Western intellectual history beginning with the ancient Greek philosophers, and concluding that already at the beginning of the Christian God tradition – in fact already in the apostle Paul,⁵ there occurred an historical fusion/confusion between the God of the Philosophers and the God of the Bible,⁶ Picht⁷ draws a speculative conclusion to rival that of Kant’s *noumena* or *Verstandeswesen*, which Kant also names “*selbstgemachte Hirngespinnste*”.⁸ Namely, that with the latter pronouncement of the death of God, which Picht interprets to mean the death of the God of the Philosophers (originally articulated/created by Xenophanes), Christian philosophy now has the opportunity to discover behind the fusion-fiction Deity, {God of the Philosophers + God of the Bible}, the true God of the Bible, the God-Behind-the-Mask, the God Christianity has not yet known in its history.⁹ In this *post-mortem dei* period of human history, argues Picht, philosophers will either follow a path into the ‘*große Politik*’ proclaimed by an exaltant Nietzsche,¹⁰ thereby laying the first foundations for the authentically human ‘history of man’ constructed by men upon the foundations of human thought, or there will occur an Unmasking-of-the-God whereby Christian philosophers will finally be in a paradigmatically ‘open’ position to discover the true God of the Bible: “[I]t is no longer so easy for us to welcome the death of the God of Greek philosophy as the new birth of the God of eschatological revelation and to dissolve the marriage which bound philosophy and theology together for two thousand years of the Christian tradition. But it is time to ask: What do we really mean by the name ‘God’?”¹¹

In the light of these various traditions of God/s in the West, then, and of their dyings, and notwithstanding Picht’s optimism for the future transmutation of the God-Behind-the-Mask into the God of Christian eschatology, let us examine a different alternative—let us assume that we moderns do in fact live *post mortem Dei christiani*. Let us also assume, thus giving due credit to Nietzsche, Vahanian, Levinas, Hamilton, et al., who have proclaimed the death of the Christian God (as opposed to Picht’s God of the Philosophers), that there are plausible intellectual justifications for why the modern world has moved beyond the Christian faith. In the Great Conversation, the

general themes: 1) some variation of atheism (1, 2); 2) a language shortfall (3,4,10); 3) and, a narrative no longer consistent with men’s understanding or experience of the world (5, 6, 7, 8, 9).

⁵ Georg Picht, “The God of the Philosophers”, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (Mar., 1980), pp. 61-79. Picht, 74: “The equation of the God of biblical revelation with the God of Greek philosophy begins, thus, in Paul already... [...] The ambivalent alliance between the God of biblical revelation and the God of philosophy is... assigned to theology from its origin...”

⁶ *Ibid.*, 71: “True, Christian theology, from the earliest church fathers to the present day, fused the God of Christian revelation with the God of Greek philosophy almost inseparable.”

⁷ *Ibid.*, 68.

⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena zu einer jeden künftigen Metaphysik*, Hamburg, Felix Meiner Verlag, 1976, 13:292.

⁹ *Op. cit.*, 71ff.

¹⁰ Picht, 1980, 66-67.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 77.

‘death of God’ thinkers have laid the theoretical foundations of an idea.

A Holzweg

When Plato posited the reality of the Forms to explain how things came into being and (were) moved, it was not long before Aristotle came along to point out that, at the end of the day, the Forms are only a theoretical model with logical issues (*e.g.*, their immovable, yet causative natures), and that a very adequate, but almost entirely empirical description of reality could be posited without them. If I may play the role of a much-reduced, modern Aristotle, I would like to suggest that the modern ‘God is Dead’ propositions and treatments also contain an untenable assumption – that the Christian God ever ‘existed’. This paper is in agreement with Professor Picht’s analysis of the historical evidence, but in profound disagreement with his conclusion that the God that has died is *only* the shadow God of the Philosophers; the *wider* evidence of Western history, and not simply the evidence from the history of the Western philosophical tradition, suggests that it is in fact the Christian God, and very specifically ‘the God of the Bible’, who has gone missing. And there is no need of a romantic and exalted *post mortem*: for the failure of the ‘God of the Bible’, equal to that of His Alter Ego the God of the Christians, is that, as a philosophical Fiction derived from debate and consensus, He/They *never* had any historical reality. This path, of course, was already sign-posted by Anthony Kenny in the Wilde Lectures in Natural Religion (1970-72) at Oxford University, in which he develops the following argument:

If the argument of the previous chapters has been correct then there is no such being as the God of traditional natural theology: the concept of God propounded by scholastic theologians and rationalist philosophers is an incoherent one. [...] [I]n the notion of a God who foresees all sins but is the author of none, there lurks a contradiction. There cannot, if our argument has been sound, be a timeless, immutable, omniscient, omnipotent, all-good being.¹²

So this thesis is not quite new in this telling, and has long been the white elephant in the room of scholars of Western religions (per Picht and Kenny), as well as the theme of poets:

Whoever, apostle, seer, or wide-browed bard,
Does his best to forge a God and then offer it back to broad
heaven,
Perceives only the mist and blackness confused
Of the firmament, sinister and calm, which has refused;
Man may try, premeditated, a God to expound
In his blind- and deafness profound,
Whether this Deity be Hindou, Pagan, Greek or Biblical in
nature,
The Shade responds to Man in nowise;¹³

¹² Anthony Kenny, *The God of the Philosophers*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979, p. 121.

¹³ Author’s translation. Victor Hugo (Hugo, Victor. [1857?] *Oeuvre Poétique*, Vol. II, *Religions et Religion*. Paris: Librairie Paul Ollendorff, p. 9): Quiconque, apôtre, augure, ou

Is the Christian God, the Protagonist of the Bible, really dead? The question is certainly of academic interest to the scholar of religions, and also a challenge for the believer in the *fides christiana*. One thread of the argument of this paper is essentially in agreement with Professor Picht's analyses, and with his conclusion that the God of the Christians is not the 'God of the Bible'. The God of the Christians is anhistorical—an extraterritorial¹⁴ Deity of Logic born out of the speculations of the earliest Platonized Christian philosophers. It could in fact be argued that Western philosophy already reached its zenith in the first half of the Common Era with the conception and articulation of this God, whose genealogy can be traced in its evolution from a Hellenistic *Abstraktum*, to a Supreme philosophico-religious Idea(1). This "God", conceived very literally out of season, corresponds to the highest ideals of western neo-platonic thought, and bears no comparison, either in actions or character, to the historico-geographical deities of the Hebrew Bible. Evidence for this argument is considerable, and is drawn from textual as well as contextual materials; from moral arguments and character studies that have been presented by, among others, the philosopher-emperor Julian; and from a consideration of intellectual arguments and traditions that evolved within medieval scholastic philosophy and beyond.

In addition to our agreement with Professor Picht's analyses, and as well with his conclusion that the God of the Christian theologians is not the 'God of the Bible', the wider evidence of Western history is compelling that the 'God of the Bible' is also not the God of the entire Bible. Professor Picht hopes that the God-Behind-the-Mask will be ultimately discoverable against the light of the Christian eschatological period, and he argues convincingly that this God-Behind-the-Mask is neither the God of the philosophers nor the God of the Christians. However, when we cast our gaze out beyond the philosophers of our Western intellectual traditions, other evidentiary threads lead us to conclude, additionally, that the 'God of the Bible', who must not be equated with the God of the philosophers or Christians, is not One: the 'God of the Bible' does not share the same deity-profile as the Yahweh of the Hebrew Bible, nor is Yahweh necessarily even the High God in the Hebrew Bible narrative (*QED*); nor, furthermore, does Yahweh share the same mythological profile as the God of the New Testament, who, however, does strangely resemble the God of the philosophers and Christians (as Professor Picht has pointed out). This fusion/confusion of identities concerning God in the traditions of the West is the result, to some large degree, of an organic association, made in the earliest days of the Jewish Christians, between the Hebrew Writings and the Christian letters of the early Jesus Movement, which were coming into circulation; the resultant material confusion in popular, and even deliberate philosophical thought, with respect to the profiles of the various gods, all being equally subsumed under the one 'God', was then accentuated by the emerging God tradition of early Christian thought, and by its subsequent codification through creedal articulations.

The 'God of the Bible'

Buttressed by archaeology, biblical scholarship has paved a wide road for the articulation of this argument; and much of recent scholarship received its impetus

barde au large front,/Forge un Dieu de son mieux et l'offre au ciel profond,/N'aperçoit que la brume et la noirceur confuse/Du firmament sinistre et calme, qui refuse;/ L'homme a beau présenter un Dieu, prémédité/ Dans son aveuglement et dans sa surdité/ Que ce Dieu soit indou, païen, grec ou biblique,/L'Ombre ne donne pas à l'homme la réplique.

¹⁴ Expression borrowed from Michel Onfray, *Traité d'athéologie* (Paris: Grasset, 2005), 189ff.

from Albrecht Alt's ground-breaking 1929 essay on the God of the Fathers,¹⁵ which was so fruitfully furthered by the works of Albright, Gordon, D.N. Freedman, Cross, et al.¹⁶ The Albright 'school', in seeking to identify more fully the various deities of the Bible in the light of their ancient Near Eastern origins, has led some to wonder whether the Western Religious narrative has "lost" the biblical Yahweh in its attempt to articulate a philosophical God. Such is R. Friedman's recent thesis: that the Hebrew Bible is literally a record of the disappearance of God—that it is the story of a god who has gone into retirement, who, like the Canaanite El a thousand years before him, is become *deus quiescens*. This is a troubling state of affairs for the study of western religions; indeed, it is potentially a worst-case scenario. For in addition to having perhaps identified the wrong deity as God, western religious scholars now must consider the possibility that the Hebrew Bible might very possibly be the narrative record of a god-become-absent from the world of men (*deus absconditus*). It has always been difficult for the missionary to make a persuasive case for a God who cannot defend himself publicly—the Baalite priests of I Kings 18 learned from Elijah, much to their detriment, that *les [dieux] absents ont toujours tort*.

The German Assyriologist Friedrich Delitzsch profiled this argument already in a 1920 volume entitled, *The Great Deception*, in which he argues that, just like the other olden gods: "the Hebrew national god (Nationalgott) belongs also to the 'anemic' ones (*elîlîm*)—as the Old Testament relishes designating the gods of other peoples—and it is impossible that he should be identified ... with the most-powerful GOD."¹⁷ He concludes with: "Israel is not the people of "GOD", but the people of Jaho, as Moab is the people of Kemosh and Assur the people of the god Asur." In a similar iteration in the *Interpreter's Bible* one reads: "The religion of the fathers was not the same as the worship of the thundering Yahweh of Sinai. The God pictured in Genesis is not like the God who reveals himself to Moses in the book of Exodus."¹⁸

§I. Textual Argument

There are persuasive reasons for rejecting the dogma that the Christian God is also, and necessarily, the God of the Hebrew Bible; or even that He is a God of ancient Near Eastern extraction. Not least of these reasons is the clear reading of the Hebrew Bible. The "apostate" Julian, emperor of the Roman Empire after the death of the Christianizing Constantine, is perhaps the first to make so cogently, and following this line of thought, the argument against the Christian God as the 'God of the Bible'. In a short work entitled *Contra Galileos*,¹⁹ Julian argues that the Galileans, or Christians, lay claim to the Jewish god, Yahweh, as their God; for Yahweh revealed himself to Moses significantly, albeit enigmatically, by declaring that he had once been known to the Patriarchs as El Shaddai, El of the wilderness, but He was now revealing Himself to Moses in a new 'persona', as "*ehyeh asher ehyeh*,"²⁰ or

¹⁵ Albrecht Alt, "Der Gott der Väter (1929)," in *Kleine Schriften zur Geschichte des Volkes Israel*. München: C.H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1959.

¹⁶ Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002, xii, gives a detailed history of the recent scholarship.

¹⁷ Friedrich Delitzsch, *Die Grosse Täuschung*, Deutsche Verlags Anstalt: Stuttgart & Berlin, 1920, 72, 74.

¹⁸ *The Interpreter's Bible* in twelve volumes. Vol. I. NY: Abingdon Press, 1952, 297.

¹⁹ Julian, *Against the Galilaeans* in *The Works of the Emperor Julian*. Vol. III. MA: Harvard University Press (Loeb), 1993.

²⁰ Exod 3 14-15, Exod 6 2-3.

Yahweh. A careful but even unsophisticated reading of the Hebrew Bible, however, seems to make clear that Yahweh (Heb. יהוה; LXX κύριος) is not the GOD known as Elyon or the Most High (Heb. עֶלְיוֹן; LXX ὑψιστος);²¹ he is Yahweh the Windwalker, mythological kin to Ba'al-Hadad, Lord of Heaven; he is the *Kriegsmann* at the head of a warring tribal league seeking through war to forge itself into a united theocratic people.²²

The evidence seems to indicate that Yahweh, the national god of the Jewish tribes, is a junior member of the henotheistic grouping of ancient Near Eastern national deities reflected in the Hebrew Bible—that this deity is in fact neither the Creator, nor the (High) GOD of the ‘Bible’, and that, furthermore, this particular subordinate ‘son of elohim’ received from the hand of Elyon a national or tribal inheritance—the Israelite tribes. Julian concludes from these various narrative threads that since the Christians claim their God to be Yahweh, inasmuch as Yahweh is not Elyon, then neither is the God of the Christians Elyon. God is not GOD.

If the apostate emperor Julian is correct, it would seem that the material confusion first arose in Hellenistic Judaism among the Jews of the Diaspora, who were influenced by their reading of the Greek LXX. Paul of Tarsus, the Hellenized, Roman-Jewish author of many of the NT letters, was just such a Jew of the Diaspora. It is therefore not surprising that the θεός-God of Paul’s letters (per Picht) should be so un-Yawhistic; for the Hellenized θεός is generic in both name and nature. θεός does not equate to the very particular Jewish warrior god, Yahweh, who, we shall see, does not figure either mythologically or materially into the Christian articulation of the ‘God of the Bible’. The problem remains, however, that the early Christians received the Mosaic writings as endowed with divine authority. The letters of Paul illustrate this ambivalence excellently; for according to Dodd, despite his Jewishness, Paul “frequently uses expressions about God closely similar to those of Hellenistic philosophy (e.g. Rom i.19-20, xi.36; I Cor. xii.6; Eph. iv.6).”²³ The earliest Jewish Christians held the messianic event to be an organic out-flowing of Jewish history, and argued that the God they worship is identical with the Jewish God, Yahweh. So Julian, challenging this ‘dogma’ proclaimed by the Galilean bishops, by juxtaposing that dogma against non-compliant texts of the Hebrew Bible, concludes that the Christians, instead of laying claim to Hypsistos, mistakenly frame their trinitarian God around a lower-ranked national god in the Hebrew Writings, *i.e.*, Yahweh.

In Deut. 32:8-9, which is part of the very ancient Song of Moses, the Israelites are reminded that Yahweh received an inheritance of people and land from the High GOD Elyon, who distributed to each of his divine sons a specific inheritance. It is, from a human point of view, a common ancient Near Eastern motif that the land belongs to the people in heritage from their god. This is, in fact, common in the Hebrew writings—the Israelite tribes receive from the hand of their god the land of Canaan as an inheritance.²⁴ Another conception of inheritance in the Hebrew Bible is

²¹Cf. H.S. Nyberg, “Studien zum Religionskampf” in *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft*, vol. 35, 1938, 329-385, pp. 335-345 for scholarship on the question of El, Al, Elyon, etc.

²² Julius Wellhausen, *Israelitische und Jüdische Geschichte*. Berlin: Georg Reimer, 1914, 23ff.

²³ C.H. Dodd, *The Bible and the Greeks*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1954, 7.

²⁴ E.g., Num. 16:14, Num. 26:53, Num. 26:54, Num. 27:7, Num. 32:19, Num. 32:32, Num. 34:2, Num. 34:29, Num. 36:2, Deut. 4:21, Deut. 4:38, Deut. 12:9, Deut. 15:4, Deut. 19:10, Deut. 19:14, Deut. 20:16, *Deut. 21:23 (of messianic interest), Deut. 24:4, Deut. 25:19, Deut. 26:1, Deut. 29:8...

that Yahweh himself is an inheritance, not necessarily for the whole people, but for one certain group or tribe from among the people—Yahweh is the inheritance of the Levites;²⁵ and when a group receives service to Yahweh as inheritance, because this inheritance does not provide for the practical needs of the heirs, their ‘impractical’ inheritance is also allied with the preeminently practical idea of tithing; the other tribes must contribute to the material support of the Levites.

There is yet another conception of inheritance found in the Hebrew Bible, which is that the land itself (*i.e.*, Canaan) is said to be an inheritance *for Yahweh*. From a Hand higher than his own Yahweh received a landed inheritance.²⁶ There are also some twenty-nine references in the Hebrew Bible to the people—Jacob—as an inheritance *for Yahweh*. The implications of course are similar—that Yahweh received His inheritance from the hand of the Most High; but there is also the suggestion that Yahweh had some choice in selecting out his own inheritance.²⁷

The idea that the land of Canaan constitutes an inheritance for Yahweh, and that Yahweh received the people—Jacob—as an inheritance, gives impetus to Julian’s argument; for Deut. 32:8-9 records the story of the distribution of their inheritance to all the Sons of Elohim, including Yahweh, from the hand of the Most High. This, according to Julian, is yet another reason to reject the association between the Christian God and either the Abrahamic Most High GOD or the Mosaic national god Yahweh. Yahweh is a tribal deity with ‘tunnel vision’; he is interested in only one tribal people and one land, and simply does not have the geographical stature, personal qualities, or ‘general’ vision one would expect from a universal GOD. In fact, in contrast to Christian arguments concerning God as creator, a universal GOD does not necessarily have to be the Creator in neo-platonic thought. Therefore, it should not surprise us that Julian would make this common platonic distinction—for he uses the term demiurgos or begetter, arguing that it does not follow that demiurgos has to be either God or GOD. Thus, when the Christians maintain that their God is The Creator, which Julian translates through the platonic conception of the creating demiurgos principle, they make the argument themselves for the subordination of their God.

§II. Contextual Argument

In addition to the problematic nature of the evidence from the Hebrew Bible, which renders improbable any Yahweh-θεος/GOD connection, the mytho-poetic narrative—the ‘Story’ of the Hebrew Bible—also speaks against the idea that the Christian or NT God is GOD. This difficulty is partly due to the mis-conception that the Bible is a single or unified ‘book’; it is rather a *library* compiled of at least sixty-six authors who composed their works over the space of approximately eight hundred years, which makes uniformity and continuity of language and meaning simply impossible to guarantee. This consideration is important when asking of the ‘Bible’-in-translation the following questions: Who is the principal protagonist [God/GOD] of this Story? Which deity, exactly, stands behind the generic English word, God? Or is it rather that there is no one particular deity standing behind this Word-Idea? So

²⁵ Num. 18:20, Deut. 10:9, Deut. 18:1, Deut. 18:2, Josh. 13:14, Josh. 13:33, Josh. 14:3, Josh. 18:7, Josh. 21:3, *Psa. 16:5 (perhaps of messianic interest, and the provision of the later Christian notion of the priesthood of believers), *Ezek. 44:28.

²⁶ Principally from the Pentateuch (Exod 15 17, Deut 9 26, Deut 9 29), and Psalm 2.

²⁷ Ex. 34:9; Deut. 4:20; Deut. 9:26; Deut. 9:29; 1Sam. 10:1; 1Kings 8:51; *1Kings 8:53; 2Kings 21:14; Psa. 28:9; Psa. 33:12; Psa. 47:4; Psa. 68:9; Psa. 74:2.

perhaps the greatest snag in the dogma of biblical monotheism is that the monolatric ‘Story’ that flows across the pages of the Hebrew Bible is inseparably woven into an intricately designed, henotheistic, ancient Near Eastern fabric, complete with warring gods sustaining their warring tribal inheritances. The Hebrew ‘Bible’ is not a monotheistic text: it is, rather, an epic compilation of theomachically-framed stories set against a Miltonesque backdrop of a world replete with deities, great and small, weak and strong.

A Panoply of Gods

One of the more obvious goddesses of the ‘Bible’ is the Queen of Heaven from Jeremiah 44, who might be the Canaanite Asherah²⁸ or Anat.²⁹ In the note to this passage in the third edition (2001) of the *New Oxford Annotated Bible*, the editor refers to evidence from “fifth-century BCE documents from Elephantine,” which indicates that “at least some Jews in Egypt practiced a form of Yahwism that included worship of the goddess Anat-Yahu (‘Anat of the LORD’).” However, this might also be a syncretistic reference to the Egyptian goddess Isis, given the late seventh-early sixth century dating of Jeremiah, and the fact that the setting for this scene is in Egypt. On the other hand, Smith also writes that while Queen of Heaven is clearly the title of a goddess, it is unclear whether she be “Astarte, Ishtar (or a syncretized Astarte-Ishtar) or less likely Anat.”³⁰ Anat is said (in several fragmentary contexts) to have born to Baal a young bull, which provides yet a further linking with Exod 32 and the story of the golden calf. Medieval Christianity will see in Jeremiah 44 a pre-vision of Mary, the Mother of God, *Regina caelorum*.³¹

Another biblical deity is Baal, the huge³² warrior god of the ancient Canaanite stories, who is famously challenged to a duel, and defeated, by Yahweh in I Kings 18. Beyond the obvious mythopoetic framing of this story, R. Friedman³³ points out that this is, essentially, the story of God’s swansong—His “last public miracle” in the biblical record; for after the stunning demonstration of His power poured out in divine fire on Elijah’s stone altar on Mount Carmel, God will refuse to appear to Elijah at Horeb/Sinai. It is interesting to note that in addition to the single prophet of Yahweh and the 450 prophets of Baal, there were also present for this gigantomachy the 400 prophets of Asherah, which would suggest, were the story to be read according to the normative agonistic themes of ancient Near Eastern mythologies, that the duel between Yahweh and Baal might well have been for the ‘fair’ hand of the divine Asherah!

There are also a variety of El gods in the Hebrew Bible. An ancient High God in the Canaanite literature, El is widely attested at Ebla, although Dagan was supreme god of the Eblaitic pantheon. El was head of the Ugaritic pantheon of gods, and

²⁸ For a recent treatment of Asherah, see Judith M. Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah*, (Cambridge: CUP, 2003).

²⁹ For Anat, see U. Cassuto, *The Goddess Anath*, (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1971).

³⁰ Smith, 2002, 182.

³¹ A twelfth century plainchant, the *Regina caelorum* was originally sung for the Feast of the Assumption.

³² The idea of Baal’s sheer size, his height and largeness, is implied in *Baal* III i 25ff. Cf. G.R. Driver, *Canaanite Myths and Legends*. Edinburgh: Clark, 1956, 111.

³³ Richard Elliott Friedman, *The Disappearance of God*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1995, 82ff.

Asherah his consort. Yet, although there are temples to both Dagan and Baal at Ras Shamra, there seems to have been there no cult to El, for no El temple has been excavated to date. In addition to being a particular ancient Near Eastern High God, then, the consensus of the scholarly literature is that El (*Il*) also occurs as a generic term for ‘deity’.³⁴ El is also widely attested in the Hebrew Bible, the most common occurrences of which are found primarily in conjunction with other divine names;³⁵ likewise, the El-deities are generally linked to specific geographical locations. There are at least two major interpretative theories that attempt to make sense of the El-deities in the biblical texts. According to Alt’s widely accepted (polytheistic) theory, the El names refer to local *numina*, or minor nameless deities tied to specific places. An alternative (monotheistic) theory, which is also widely held, is that the El-deities are local manifestations of the one god, El.³⁶ Among other biblically attested El-deities, identified with their geographical cult sites, are El Roi (Beer-lahai-roi);³⁷ El Olam (Beersheba);³⁸ El Elohe-Israel (Shechem);³⁹ El Bethel (Bethel);⁴⁰ and El Elyon (Jerusalem).⁴¹ Likewise, there is El Shadday, who has a tribal link through the Benjaminites; and, finally, there is possibly an El-type deity behind the story of Jacob’s experience at Peniel.⁴²

A particularly interesting passage, which might demonstrate the possible conflation of Canaanite El with Israelite Yahweh, is the anti-Baalite book of Hosea.⁴³ The prophet writes (11:7): “My people are bent on turning away from me. To the Most High (‘*l*’) they call, but he does not raise them up at all.” Some scholars have argued that the broad strokes of Ugaritic literature combine to tell the story of *aliyan* Baal’s dispute with El for the kingship of the gods; for El is already become ancient and remote in the literature of the Ugaritic period, a *deus quiescens*. Lack,⁴⁴ for example, builds upon Nyberg’s suggestions of parallels between the Ugaritic *Keret*

³⁴ Giovanni Pettinato, *The Archives of Ebla*. NY: Doubleday, 1981, 248ff.

³⁵ *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (DDD), ed., Pieter van der Toorn, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1999, 295: “In the OT, ‘Elyon appears several times with El, either in collocation (Gen 14:18-22; Ps 78:35), or in parallelism (Num 24:16; Pss 73:11; 107:11).”

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 1999, 295.

³⁷ Gen. 16:13; Cf. DDD 291.

³⁸ Gen. 21:33. Cf. *inter alia* DDD, 288; Rudolf Kittel, *Die hellenistische Mysterienreligion und das Alte Testament*, Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1924, 73ff., and particularly 76-80; David Noel Freedman, “Divine Names and Titles in Early Hebrew Poetry,” in *Magnalia Dei. The Mighty Acts of God*, edited by Cross, Lemke, Miller, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1976, 61-2; Jack Miles, *God. A Biography*. NY: Knopf, 1995, 20, and esp. 72; and Lynn Clapham, “Mythopoetic Antecedents of the Biblical World-View and Their Transformation in Early Israelite Thought,” in *Magnalia Dei. The Mighty Acts of God*, edited by Cross, Lemke, Miller. NY: Doubleday & Co., 1976.

Clapham, 1976, 114-117.

³⁹ Gen. 33:20.

⁴⁰ Gen. 31:13; 35:7; cf. Gen. 28:10-22.

⁴¹ Gen. 14:9, 18-20, 22 & Ps 78:35.

⁴² Gen. 32:22-32.

⁴³ DDD, 1999, 295.

⁴⁴ Rémi Lack, “Les Origines de Elyon, Le Très-Haut, Dans La Tradition Culturelle d’Israel” in *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, vol. 24, 1962, 44-64, 48.

and the Hebrew Bible's *Hosea*,⁴⁵ which would justify emendations to *Hosea* 7:16 and 11:7, (and perhaps 10:5); so he writes that once emended following Nyberg, these verses would read respectively: "they turn toward the Most High," and "he invokes the Most High." This allows the emended *Hosea* text to conform more nearly to an earlier Ugaritic parallel, and both emendations, "indiquent une concurrence avec Jahvé," which would encourage a theomachic reading of this biblical text, transforming this story into a clash between the Israelite Yahweh and the Canaanite Baal Elyon, the Victor Baal of the Ugaritic texts.

References to other gods of the 'Bible' include the Phoenician *mlk* (Moloch),⁴⁶ Tammuz,⁴⁷ son of Mother Earth and often equated with Osiris (Egypt), Adon or Adonis (Phoenicia), and Attis (Phrygia);⁴⁸ a divine duo, Barad⁴⁹ and Qeteb⁵⁰; there is also Gad (Fortune);⁵¹ Mani (Destiny),⁵² who may be one of the oldest deities on human record; Salem;⁵³ Zedeq⁵⁴ (linked to *Mlk-zedek*); Misor (Justice); and Mot, perhaps the most misrepresented biblical deity because almost always translated metaphorically.⁵⁵

In the Hebrew Writings there are several references to ancient gods who, like Mot, have long been mis-cast in translations as language metaphors. There is, for example, the Mesopotamian duo of attendant deities, Deber⁵⁶ and Resheph,⁵⁷ who attended upon Shamash, the great Sun god between the two rivers, as well as upon

⁴⁵ H. S. Nyberg, *Studien zum Hoseabuch* in *Uppsala Universitets Arsskrift*, vol. 6, 1-144, 1935, 58ff, 90, 120. Cf. G.R. Driver, "Hebrew Al (High One) as a Divine Title" in *The Expository Times*, vol. 50, 1938/9, 92-93, 92.

⁴⁶ Cf. *DDD*, 1999, 583; and Conrad L'Heureux, *Rank Among the Canaanite Gods* (Harvard Semitic Monographs 21), Missoula Montana: Scholars Press, 1979, 122. In the Hebrew Bible references include Leviticus (18:21; 20:2-5); Kings (1 Kgs 11:7(?), and 2 Kgs 23:10); and Jeremiah (32:35). Cf. LXX Amos 5:26, quoted in Acts 7:43.

⁴⁷ Ez. 8:14; Isa. 17:10-11; Dan. 11:37.

⁴⁸ Cf. *DDD* 828.

⁴⁹ Cf. Isa. 28:2, where Barad is paralleled with Qeteb; and Ps. 78:48; and Isa. 28:2.

⁵⁰ Deut. 32:24; Ps. 91:5-6; Hos. 13:14; Isa. 28:2.

⁵¹ Gen. 30:10-13; Isa 65:11-12; attested in personal names: Num 13:10, 11; Ezra 2:12; attested in place names: Josh 11:17, 15:37.

⁵² From Ebla; Isa. 65:11; Prov 23:30; Surah 53:20 (Manat [goddess]); cf. Ps 16:5; 61:3, 8; 65:4; 74:22.

⁵³ Cf. Gen. 14:18; Judg 6:11-32 (ba'al salom).

⁵⁴ Isa 51:1; Isa 61:3; Ps. 4:6; Ps 17:1; Ps 94:15. Cf. Gen. 14:18; **Ps. 110:4**; Heb 5:6; 6:20-7-17; (cf. solar vestiges in Mic 7:9; Isa 45:8, 19; Hos 10:12); Ps 45:7-8; cf. Ps 9:9; 58:2; 89:15; 97:7; 98:9; Isa 1:21, 26; 45:19; Jer 31:23, and 33:16. Cf. War Scroll (1QM 17:7-8); 11Qmelch.

⁵⁵ Ps 61, 8?; I Cor.; cf. Jer 9:20. Theodor H. Gaster, "The Combat of Death and the Most High" in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland*, 1932, 857-896. Gaster (1932:859) presents a mythological argument concerning Moth, inclusive of the Hebrew Bible, which is entirely consistent with the overall tenor of ancient Near Eastern thought. Cf. W. Hermann, "Jahwes triumph über Mot" in *Ugaritische Forschung*, Vol. 11, 1979, 371-377, 372, and 375, nt. 32.

⁵⁶ Dabir-Ebla; Hab. 3:5, 14; Ps 91:3, 6; cf. Hos. 13:14; Ps. 91:6.

⁵⁷ Resheph appears in the Hebrew Bible: in Ps 76:4 (cf. Job 5:7, and possibly Ps. 91:5). In the Apocrypha (Sir 43:17); in Cant 8:6; Deut 32:24 and Ps 78:48. In Hab. 3:5, we have a picture of a theophany, where the god 𐎗𐎟𐎕𐎗 is presented as a divine warrior, Lord of light (reminiscent of Shamash), and before Him goes Deber (lord of epidemics, Ex 9:3 & Jer 21:6), while Resheph (pestilence) follows on His heels.

Marduk. This attending duo is subsequently discovered in the Hebrew Bible, in Habbakuk, apparently transferring its allegiance to Elohe (GOD? Yahweh?). By extension, this would seem to lend to the Hebrew Elohe the qualities of the Mesopotamian Shamash or the Edomite Cos. Theomachic implications abound. In the translations, however, (cf. esp. Hab. 3:3-6), these attending deities vanish utterly into metaphor, thereby transforming a polytheistic theophany of ancient Near Eastern dimensions into a dogma-laden monotheistic hymn. It is accurate to suggest that this hymn of Habbakuk, when properly translated, portrays Elohe striding forth flanked by his attendants Deber and Resheph, and that the story thereby conforms to ancient Mesopotamian mytho-poetic usage.⁵⁸ According to Gray, this passage “describes the theophany of Jahweh with much local colour which suggests to us at once his own character as a desert deity and features perhaps borrowed from his neighbor Cos of Edom, [*i.e.*,] the sun-god Apollo, the dispenser of plague and healing.”⁵⁹

With its assortment of deities and its traditional mytho-poetic strands built upon divine conflict and conquest, the ‘Story’ of the Hebrew Bible cannot be considered in any sense reflective of a monotheistic worldview. Rather, the ‘Story’ that runs through the narrative compilation like the thread of Ariadne winding through the corridors of the Minotaur’s labyrinth, is ordered according to common ancient Near Eastern conceptions of theomachy, which mirrors a world of deities, young and ancient, powerful and weak, male and female. As the literature from Canaan reflects a cosmic transition from Ebla to Ugarit,⁶⁰ the Hebrew Bible, which narrates the arrival of the Yawistically-led nomads from the south,⁶¹ reflects a further transition from the Canaanite Baal to Yahweh.

Evidence of this is the relentless bloody-mindedness of Yahweh in terms of ‘other gods’. Some sixty-four times there is mention in the Hebrew Bible of Israel’s inclination to pursue ‘other gods’. There is also the rivalry between Baal and Yahweh, where qualities normally reserved for the Canaanite Baal have been incorporated into descriptions of Yahweh.⁶² Traditional Baalite epithets grafted onto Yahweh are, ‘God of the mountains’ (I Kgs 20:23; Ps 48:3); ‘Rider upon the Clouds’ (Deut 32-33); and various Hadad or Baalite storm-god traits,⁶³ which would certainly support the idea that a mytho-poetic understanding of Yahweh is not inappropriate.

The Hebrew Bible also yields evidence of applying to Yahweh epithets borrowed from the ancient Canaanite El.⁶⁴ Van der Toorn⁶⁵ posits what seems a plausible mythological chronology when he says: “The process of El’s retreat in favour of Dagan (Ebla, late third millennium) and later Baal (Ugarit, mid-second millennium) had long been under way. [...] El’s career as a living god had ended.” Van der Toorn further maintains that while it is true that the El name has survived in the form of expressions (*e.g.*, the Council of El in Ps. 82), or as a general expression for ‘god’,

⁵⁸ DDD 232.

⁵⁹ John Gray, “The Hebrew Conception of the Kingship of God: Its Origin and Development” in *Vetus Testamentum*, Vol. VI, 1956, 268-285, 280.

⁶⁰ DDD 917.

⁶¹ L’Heureux, 1979, 29ff.

⁶² W. Robertson Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (First Series). London: Adam and Charles Black, 1901, 38.

⁶³ Nyberg, 1938, 383. Cf. Judg 5:4-5; Ps 18:12[11]; [Ps. 18:14[13]; Ps. 68:8ff.

⁶⁴ Cf. Smith, 2002, xxx-xxxvi, 43-47; cf. Ps. 82, 89, I Kings 18, 23.

⁶⁵ Pieter van der Toorn, “Yahweh” in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible*, Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1999, 910-919, 917.

there are no traces of polemics against El in the Hebrew Bible.⁶⁶ Among the El traits that the Israelite Yahweh will inherit, are the image of the bearded patriarch of great age,⁶⁷ authority to preside over the divine councils,⁶⁸ and the quality of compassion.⁶⁹ An argument can also be made that El and Yahweh (with Baal in-between) share the same paramour, Asherah.⁷⁰

Given the monotheistic discourse framing the biblical ‘Story’, to suggest a reading of the Bible that involves a variety of deities will certainly result in difficulties of ‘mythological’ proportions. For example, mythologically speaking, the biblical creation episodes seem to be of the Baal sort, organized around the ordering of chaos, rather than of the El sort, *i.e.*, cosmic creation stories, “which are of an ultimate and primordial nature.”⁷¹ Cosmic creation stories are such as are found in the Mesopotamian creation epic, *Enuma Elish*, where one reads of the creation of gods, and of Marduk’s creative activity following his victory over Tiamat; or, similarly, in the Hindu creation hymn found in *Rg Veda* 10.

In reconstructing the history of Early Israel and its conception of Yahweh, Hyatt argues that the early Israelites “looked upon Yahweh primarily as a deity who controlled their history rather than as a creator god.”⁷² Likewise, asking “whether early Israel placed emphasis upon this aspect of deity, and considered Yahweh as being primarily a creator deity,” he concludes that “[t]here is little or no evidence for such an emphasis until well after the time of Moses.” There seems to be general scholarly agreement that Yahweh is associated more with matters of material governance over chaos, than with actions of cosmic creation, which would seem to confirm that, when contextualized mythologically, Yahweh reflects a subordinate ancient Near Eastern deity.

On the question of creation and whether Yahweh is more consistently depicted as a cosmic governor than a cosmic creator,⁷³ Batto⁷⁴ provides a multitude of examples that range through both the Hebrew Bible and the NT: Yahweh has the power to still the raging sea⁷⁵ and to trample upon the back of the sea;⁷⁶ similarly, in the NT Jesus calms the sea [Yamm];⁷⁷ for in the episode in which he walks upon the sea⁷⁸ the

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* Cf. Smith, 2002, 33.

⁶⁷ El is the ‘Father of years’ and presented as a bearded patriarch; Yahweh is the bearded ‘Ancient of days’ (Dan 7.9-14.22).

⁶⁸ Cf. Job 1; Ps. 82.

⁶⁹ Both gods described as compassionate. El is compassionate (*ltpon*); Yahweh is ‘merciful and gracious’ (Ex. 34.6).

⁷⁰ I Kings 18.

⁷¹ Cf. L. Fisher, “Creation at Ugarit and in the Old Testament,” *Vetus Testamentum*, vol. 15, 1965, 313-324. Cf. J. Philip Hyatt, “Was Yahweh Originally a Creator Deity?” in *SBL*, vol. 86, 1967, 369-377, *passim*; John Gray, “The Hebrew Conception of the Kingship of God: Its Origin and Development” in *Vetus Testamentum*, Vol. VI, 1956, 268-285, 273ff.

⁷² J. Philip Hyatt, “The Origin of Mosaic Yahwism” in *The Teacher’s Yoke. Studies in Memory of Henry Trantham*. TX: Baylor University Press, 1964, 88, 370.

⁷³ H. Niehr, “Der höchste Gott” in *Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, Berlin: de Gruyter, 1990, 119-140, 126.

⁷⁴ Bernard Batto, “The Sleeping God: An Ancient Near Eastern Motif of Divine Sovereignty” in *Biblica* 68, 1987, 153-177, 172ff.

⁷⁵ Job 26,12; Isa 51,15; Jer 31,35; cf. Pss 89,9[10]; 107,29.

⁷⁶ Job 9,8; Hab 3,15; Ps 77,20.

⁷⁷ Matt 8,23-27; Mk 4,35-41; Lk 8,23-27.

⁷⁸ Matt 14,25; Mk 6,48; Jn 6,19.

situation is described in language reminiscent of Yahweh's walking or trampling on the back of Yamm;⁷⁹ Jesus' calming of the sea borrows upon the terminology of Yahweh's stilling of the hostile sea, especially when this stilling is done through the divine rebuke.⁸⁰ Batto,⁸¹ however, does not distinguish between cosmic governance and cosmic creation, thinking, monotheistically, that surely only a Creator can ultimately govern his creation in such an elemental fashion—that these two distinct roles would belong to God (El?) alone, and would seem to derive ultimately from his victory over the primeval.

§III. Moral Argument

In addition to textual and contextual arguments in our critique of the fiction of God, there is a third argument that would seem to support the idea that the Christian 'Deity' is anhistorical, a Being of theory and philosophical construct, having no existential presence. This may perhaps be called the moral argument against the existence of God. From highest antiquity to the modern period, moral character has entered into the question of Divine identity and human action, although perhaps not always in a way thinkers immersed in the Christian period might suspect.

There is an interesting continuity from the epic poets and tragedians of ancient Greek all the way up through the later Athenian philosophers, for example, in that the question of moral character in their gods, although a significant element in evaluating the actions of the gods in terms of men, never really took on any urgency; for in their tragic worldview the gods were invisible, irresistible causal forces that were actively implicated in the affairs of men—they were Power Beings, not dissimilar to the God of Job in the Hebrew Bible. And the various stories of the Greeks depict a world where men simply cannot forestall the Gods, because they have neither the requisite knowledge for it, nor sufficient power; so they endure the Gods as a necessary framing of their real world. This is Homer's story in the *Iliad* (1.1.1-1.1.5), for example, when he tells the Muse to sing the anger of Achilles (Μῆνιν ἄειδε θεα), but then steps in to remind his audience that Zeus' plan was working itself out through that anger (Διὸς δ' ἐτελείετο βουλή).

These Power Beings are also reflected in the tragedy of an expendable Oedipus (Sophocles' Oedipus stories), who only slowly begins to understand that Zeus is working out a plan for the city of Athens, and that his dead body would be a blessing to the city at the end of his long and ill-fated life. This is also the story of an expendable Orestes (Aeschylus' *Oresteia Trilogy*), whom Zeus, again through the agency of Apollo, uses in order to provoke conflict between the ancient goddesses who defend the *lex taliones*, and the new Olympian gods, who have decreed a new form of justice, where instead of automatic (read: blind) retribution of an eye for an eye triggered by ancient gods and ancient laws, men would sit together and deliberate and render human justice.

When the lyric poet Bacchylides (5th B.C.E.) composed the story of the sacking of Sardis and the defeat of the Lydian King, Croesus, at the hands of the Persian army (*Epinicians*, Ode 3), while clearly the same Greek worldview that is so apparent in Homer, the depiction is yet more interestingly nuanced in terms of the moral expectations a man might harbor vis-à-vis a god, and therefore gives us

⁷⁹ LXX Job 9,8.

⁸⁰ LXX Job 26,11. For example, Sea is rebuked in Pss 18,15[16] (=2 Sam 22,16); 104,7; 106,9; and Isa 50,2; and Satan is rebuked in Zech 3,2.

⁸¹ Batto, op. cit.

Moderns greater insight into the question of ancient piety. His argument: “A man should honor God, for that is the most excellent prosperity [Θεόν, θ[εό]ν τις / ἀγλαΐξέθω γὰρ ἄριστος [ῥ]λβων] (21-23).” And reminiscent of the Job-poem in the Hebrew Bible,⁸² Bacchylides gives as an example of just such a man, Croesus, who, because of his exemplary piety toward Apollo, although overcome by the tragedy of human reality, eventually reaped prosperity from the God with life among the Hyperboreans (59). Prior to the prosperity, however, the situation for Croesus is, of course, typically tragic and decidedly unprosperous in a Greek sort of way; because although Croesus was supposedly protected by Apollo (29), his city was falling to the Persian army. And as Croesus had no desire to wait for the sure slavery or death that awaited him when his walls were finally breached, he built a funeral pyre for himself and wife and daughters; and mounting the pyre, Bacchylides tells us that, quite unlike Job who never cursed the name of God, Croesus dared to shout out to the heavens in anguish, Ὑπέρβιε δαίμον, ποῦ θεῶν ἐστιν χάρις? (3.15). “Outrageous⁸³ Deity! Where is the gratitude of the gods?” Lamenting that he and his city are abandoned by the God, that all is lost and death is sweet, Croesus has the pyre set alight. Just at that moment, though, says Bacchylides, “when the flashing force of terrible fire began to shoot through the wood, [55] Zeus set a dark rain-cloud over it, and began to quench the golden flame. Nothing is unbelievable which is brought about by the gods’ ambition. [Ἀπιστον οὐδὲν ὅ τι θ[εῶν μέ]ριμνα τεύχει]”⁸⁴

It is also in this respect that Plato’s *Republic* is irony rather than political philosophy; because in an ideal government of men, those poets who depict gods that act as appallingly as the Greek gods were said to act would not be permitted in the city. Necessarily, then, given the gods they had, such a republic as Socrates describes would not have been possible in that Greece. This is also the dilemma that comes to light in Plato’s *Apology/Crito*, where Socrates asserts that the type of knowledge men would need to be truly wise is the knowledge of divine activity and intent; absent this knowledge, which alone would allow one to parry against the machinations of the gods, one truly knows nothing worth knowing. Hence Socrates, the wisest man of Athens.

As we have seen with the ancient Greeks, the question of moral character has entered into arguments about Divine identity and human action since highest antiquity. This is also apparent from attempts to resolve the inconsistencies between the protagonist of the Hebrew Bible, Yahweh, and the western interpretative traditions concerning Deity, which have their roots in the Hebrew Writings. Julian, for example, argues that the character of Yahweh reflects a deity possessed of lesser morality than that normally expected of a Great GOD, and that the God of the Galileans requires greater moral character from his followers than that embodied by Yahweh himself in the Hebrew Bible. The clear implication is that Yahweh does not have the stature of

⁸² There is no intent to imply influence between the author of Job and Bacchylides (5th century B.C.E); there are at least three suggested dates for the composition of the Job poem: 700 BC, 550 BC, and 400-300 BC. Also, while *Job* is clearly considered Wisdom literature in the ancient Near Eastern tradition, the text we are here considering from the *Epinicians* is an ode, which is intended to praise or glorify.

⁸³ Reader’s choice of translation: of overwhelming strength or might; overweening; outrageous; wanton; possibly, arrogant.

⁸⁴ The Perseus (Tufts) project translation of Bacchylides (*Odes*, 1991, with support provided for entering the text by The Annenberg CPB/Project, is a fine rendering. Cf. <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Bacchyl.%20Ep.%203.62&lang=original>.

the God articulated by the Christians, nor that of Julian's Great GOD. This moral double-standard has been a thorn in the side to just about everyone, lay and specialist alike, as is obvious from Dawkins' observation in *The GOD Delusion*: "The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleaner; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully."⁸⁵

Mowinckel,⁸⁶ addressing this difficulty, says that it is "self-evident that the concept of God that the desert tribes were able to form has very primitive features: God is bound to nature, wild, unpredictable, 'demonic,' sometimes cruel. It does not surprise us to hear that they could suppose that Yahweh fell upon Moses in the night trying to kill him because he was not circumcised (Exod. 4:24-26)." Mowinckel tries to resolve these problematic depictions of Yahweh in a manner consistent with Christian thought. Miles (1995: 34ff., 41, 45, and passim), on the other hand, circumvents the identity confusion between God and the Lord God in the earlier sections of the Hebrew Bible (and specifically Genesis) by retelling the 'story' from the redactor 'point of view', thus effectively ignoring the narrative and language layers won through critical scholarship. Going to pains to show the striking differences, both in character and action, between God and the Lord God in the biblical narrative, instead of proposing that we are confronted with (at least) two entirely different deities who have been cobbled together by later editors, Miles prefers to conclude that the Deity who ultimately rises to the surface of the various stories is fundamentally a contradicted narrative character, a literary schizophrenic construct.

With obviously no such care nor redactional vision, and based principally upon the constant refrain of the Hebrew Bible that Yahweh is a jealous and angry god,⁸⁷ Julian argues that Yahweh is obviously immoral. The apostle Paul writes (Gal. 5:19-21; cf. 2 Cor. 12:20-21), *using the exact same term as Yahweh uses of himself*,⁸⁸ that "the works of the flesh are manifest...: fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy (ζήλος), wraths, factions, divisions, parties, envyings, drunkenness, revellings, and such like; ...they who practice such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God." So Julian argues that in addition to being a deity of inferior rank in the hierarchy of gods, Yahweh is also like the Greek gods in the Socratic ideal city—morally unworthy either to be depicted poetically or imitated.⁸⁹ On Julian's argument, Yahweh does not possess the moral character that would make him worthy of being worshipped as GOD.

Moses portrays this new God he meets at the burning bush as a jealous God—this is the dominant profile of Yahweh in the Hebrew Bible. How then, pursues Julian (363:155D), are we to understand that this same Yahweh is the Universal Creator, *Hypsistos*? For it is already intellectually repugnant to admit that the Creator of all things should describe himself as jealous; but that He should not even be jealous

⁸⁵ Richard Dawkins, *The GOD Delusion*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006, 31.

⁸⁶ Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Old Testament as Word of God*, NY: Abingdon Press, 1959, 76.

⁸⁷ E.g. Num 25:11; Deut 4:24; 5:9; 6:15; 29:20; 32:16, 21.

⁸⁸ Both Eph. 4:31 & Deut. 6:15 use the same word for anger: Yahweh may have anger, Christians are to avoid anger. For jealousy compare Num 25:11 (ἐν τῷ ζήλῳ μου) and Gal. 5:20.

⁸⁹ Cf. Plato, *Republic* II, 377d-ff., in *Complete Works*, edited by John M. Cooper. IN: Hackett Publishing, 1977.

about the vast holdings of his *entire* creation, but only about one particular tribe, excluding all the other peoples that sprung out of his creative activity. Therefore, continues Julian, it must also be that such a Creator, notwithstanding that He has created all the nations of the earth, yet lacks the power to keep his one little group of chosen people from worshipping other gods—a conclusion that defies reason.

This Creator is also powerless to prevent the other nations from worshipping their gods, because how could it be that “he did not restrain them, if he is so jealous and does not wish that the others should be worshipped, but only himself?”⁹⁰ Either the Creator was unable to do these things, which explanation leads to impiety, or he did not wish to prevent other gods from being worshipped. In either case, Julian’s conclusion is that the notion of a Creator-*Hypsistos* who is impotent in the face of His own jealousy is an unacceptable, because morally impoverished oxymoron of the Christian theology. When considered mythologically, however, this triumvirate of deity, power, and the impotence of man is entirely consistent with the stories from the ancient Near East, and from Greece as well. Indeed, the various outworkings of precisely this tragic triumvirate is the narrative focal point for the Book of Job as it is for the epic and tragic poets of ancient Greece.

According to Deut. 32.8-9 Yahweh is subordinate to the Most High; he is neither the supreme Deity nor The Creator in the biblical ‘Story’. “Wherefore”, argues Julian (345:100C), “it is natural to think that the God of the Hebrews was not the begetter of the whole universe with lordship over the whole, but rather... that he is confined within limits, and that since his empire has bounds we must conceive of him as only one of the crowd of other gods.” This is the crux of Julian’s *textual* analysis. Likewise, it is *morally* inconceivable that the jealous Yahweh, the tribal god of one nation, should be *Hypsistos*; for it is clear from Deut. 32.8-9 that *Hypsistos* has given to the world other gods and guardians whom the Galileans ignore: “gods in no way inferior to him who from the beginning has been held in honour among the Hebrews of Judea, the only land that he chose to take thought for.”⁹¹ Likewise, in contrast to Yahweh, *Hypsistos* has not abandoned the Greeks for the Jews, and has even blessed the Greeks over the Jews; for unlike the Jews, continues Julian, the Greeks have been provoked by their gods to develop art, literature, philosophy, wisdom, politics, peace, and law. Unlike Yahweh, *Hypsistos* has sent to the nations of the earth lawgivers “not inferior to Moses.”⁹² *Hypsistos* exercises dominion over his entire creation; he is neither subordinate to other gods, nor a national god.⁹³ This is that Great GOD concerning whom Julian (423:354B) writes to the Galileans: “I revere always the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob;” for they “revered a god who was ever gracious to me and to those who worshipped him as Abraham did, for he is a very great and powerful God, but ... you do not imitate Abraham.”

Julian’s moral argument against the conceptualization of the Judeo-Christian God, also embraces the ‘neediness’ of that God, because this is the principal trait exhibited by God in the story of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11). *Prima facie*, Julian finds it already methodologically unreasonable that the Christians should reject the truth of Homer and yet accept the truth of the Tower of Babel, a story concerning the confusion of languages that is so obviously framed in mythological (*mythodic*) speech. So it is clear to Julian that the interpretative assumptions of the Christian

⁹⁰ Julian, 1993, 363:155E.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 355:141D.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 355, 143A.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 355:143A-B.

reader of the Hebrew Bible are *ab initio* duplicitous. In his analysis of Gen. 11, Julian (351:135C) inquires “whether it is reasonable to believe in a story that tells of men building a tower to reach up to the abode of God;” then he asks why such a ‘powerful’ God is so “afraid of the brutal violence of men” that He is moved to confound their language; for so to characterize a deity is to depict the moral inferiority of that deity. Julian (357:146A-B) further contends that the story of Babel is at odds with Christian claims that the Jewish god is a High God or a universal GOD; for the story does not attribute the confusion of dialects to the Jewish god alone, not to this god who descended from his abode ‘well-attended’ (Gen. 11:7) in order to diversify human language. Julian (359:148B-C) concludes that “If the immediate creator of the universe be he who is proclaimed by Moses, then we [Greeks] hold nobler beliefs concerning him inasmuch as we consider him to be the master of all things in general, but that there are besides national gods who are subordinate to him and are like viceroys of a king, each administering separately his own province.” Moreover, the Greeks do not make the mistake of inverting the hierarchy of their gods, by making a High God “the sectional rival of the gods whose station is subordinate to his.” It is better, therefore, to have the piety of the Greeks, who honor the creator of all things, than the piety of the Hebrews, who honor “one who has been assigned the lordship over a very small portion.”

Julian’s argument against the Judeo-Christian God is that this God is flawed conceptually; for the God associated nominally with Yahweh is far too limited to fit the idea of a High God—GOD. Firstly, Yahweh is too limited geographically, being associated with only one people in an entire world of peoples. Likewise, he is too limited morally, for he displays undesirable traits such as anger and jealousy. So if Yahweh is not the creator El-GOD of the Hebrew Bible,⁹⁴ and if the Christian God, *i.e.*, the Hellenistic θεός of the NT, is neither the Most High nor yet again Yahweh, who then is this Deity of the Christians?

The God (θεός) of the NT is neither consistently regional (*i.e.*, clearly Yahweh), nor philosophically sophisticated. In Acts 17:22-27, when Paul enters the city of Athens and addresses the philosophers on the Areopagus, he does not profess to them the historical Yahweh, national god of the Jews. Rather, he makes a case for a hitherto unknown God (the Ἀγνώστῳ θεῷ of 17:23), who, because He is creator, is also ‘bigger’ than any of the gods of Greek paganism, and who, consequently, has a universalized vision of the destinies of all men and all nations. Norden persuasively argues that, far from preaching the Hebrew Yahweh, the early Christian Church performed a radical philosophical abstraction of their God by “taking over” the traits and attributes of the UNKNOWN GOD of the early Gnostics, with one significant modification. The Christianized thinkers avoided the dualistic, and therefore heresiarchial, tendency of the neo-platonic Gnostic thinkers by making a fundamental connection between the UNKNOWN GOD and a Creator-demiurge; thus the Christian God became the High GOD—the UNKNOWN GOD of the *via negativa*, assuming the creative identity of a demiurge transformed into cosmic Creator.⁹⁵

Paul’s God is syncretistic- a hybrid of a Hellenized God substantiated piecemeal with Hebrew Bible texts. Furthermore, it is obvious from the later NT

⁹⁴ Niehr (*op. cit.*, 124-125) argues that the adoption of the JHWH creator tradition probably occurred in the 7th century, but that the tradition was unaware of the heaven-earth creation story of Gen 2:4b, and did not associate the Gen 2:4b creation tradition with JHWH.

⁹⁵ Eduard Norden, *Eduard, Agnostos Theos*. Stuttgart: B.G. Teubner Verlagsgesellschaft, 1956, 72ff.

Gospels that the God of Jesus is not substantially different from the God of Paul, in that neither deity seems to be a reflection of the god Yahweh. Like the θεός of Paul, the God of Jesus is universal in scope, which is to say, of equal existential weightlessness in terms of Jewish religious history. For example, Jesus systematically addresses his God as *abba*, i.e., Father; yet the type of relationship established between Yahweh and his people is quite dissimilar from the Father-child relationship that Jesus claims to exist between this [new] God and His “children”. Likewise, in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5, Jesus very clearly and very deliberately separates himself and his [new] moral principles from Yahweh and his Law. He shall in fact reverse both the *principle* of the Law given by Yahweh, as well as the *authority* imputed by Yahweh to his spokesman and lawgiver, Moses.⁹⁶

The effect of this Sermon on the Mount is (at the very least) threefold. Firstly, whereas the Law of Moses was specific to a specific people and to Yahweh, the principles proposed by Jesus are universal and transcend the particularities of nations and national gods. Secondly, whereas it was possible for many not to have contravened many of the Laws of Moses, for instance – never having killed, it is impossible for any not to have contravened every principle established by Jesus. According to Jesus and his [new] moral principles, all men have always been guilty. Finally, whereas the Laws of Moses turned on a clear principle of ‘if-then’ accountability, which is to say that it was possible to ‘repair’ specific transgressions of the Law, the Jesus Ethic is in point of fact no ethical *system* at all—Jesus is simply telling us that we are all broken every one; yet he himself never proposes a way to fix our brokenness, or at least, if he did, any record of his suggestions is lost to posterity. Historically, it will need a Paul to fill this obvious lacuna when he becomes the official metaphysical and ethical interpreter of the *Res Christi*.

In the Epistles, then, as in the Gospels, the conception of God is philosophically unsubtle. In the whole of the Greek NT His name is only ever God/θεός, and never a Semitic variation of HaShem, Yahweh, Yahweh-Elohim, Elohe, Elohim, Elyon, *Hypsistos*, or any other particular or individualized god-name. Similarly, in his nature and character, which is already Hellenized or philosophically abstracted in the NT, and thus quite different from the personalized, existentially weighty gods of the ancient Canaanite and Hebrew stories, the NT θεός does not equate to the Hebrew Bible’s Yahweh. Yahweh has no material part in the Christian conception of God

§IV. Scholastic Argument and Beyond

Pascal (17th century) famously contended that “Le Dieu des chrétiens ne consiste pas en un Dieu simplement auteur des vérités géométriques et de l’ordre des elements...”⁹⁷ So it is ironic that the conception of the Christian God reflects precisely that philosophical quality Pascal denies—‘He’ is a Deity of grammar, a weightless philosophical Abstraction derived from and grounded in the abstract intellectual notions of comparatives and superlatives; ‘He’ is also, precisely, the logically-conceived Deity against which Voltaire will argue 100 years later in his *Traité de*

⁹⁶ For a discussion of the difficulties relevant to the hermeneutical antecedents of this antithetical style of discourse, see Hans Joachim Schoeps, *Aus frühchristlicher Zeit*. Tübingen: Verlag J.C.B. Mohr, 1950, 271ff.

⁹⁷ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*. Paris: Gallimard, Livre de Poche, 1965, 334-335.

metaphysique [1754].⁹⁸ This is confirmed in Voltaire's commentary on Julian the Apostate's *Discours de l'empereur Julien contre les chrétiens*, where Voltaire clearly grasps Julian's desire to recast, by means of a hierarchical realignment, the impoverished worldview of the Galileans into the familiar world of gods and men known by the ancients: "Dans cent passages des livres Juifs vous trouvez un Dieu universel qui commande à toute la terre; dans cent autres passages vous ne trouvez qu'un Dieu local, un Dieu Juif qui combat contre un Dieu Philistin, contre un Dieu Moabite, comme les Dieux de Troye dans Homère combattent contre les Dieux de la Grèce."⁹⁹

This conception of a shadow-reality Deity is consistent with the overall orientation and impetus inherited from the Christian philosophers of the scholastic period; and indeed, according to Rougier,¹⁰⁰ the "work" of the schoolmen was in fact the creation of *philosophical* truth; thus, "the 'trinity', to the same degree as the 'existence of God', became a philosophical truth."

It has been said that Boethius framed the idea of God for the entire Early Middle Ages.¹⁰¹ For Boethius, God is the Creator; He is the "Maker of the circle of the stars, who rules according to reason";¹⁰² He is the *omnium summum bonorum*¹⁰³ Who will become for Aquinas, as He had been for Augustine, the *a posteriori* *Summum Bonum*; and He shall be for Anselm the *a priori* 'that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought', which must also exist, because it would degrade the perfection of the superlative idea if It should not also exist. These arguments, of course, are framed around the philosophical distinction between Being (*Esse*) and Essence (*Essentia*), and also assume as true the platonic idea that there are levels of substantiality: 1) the essence of a material order; 2) the essence of a non-material order; and 3) the essence of God, who is a fusion of *Esse* and *Essentia*.

Out of this scholastic Medieval tradition shall also arise other philosophical arguments for the existence of this God. Indeed, in lieu of an existentially weighty god of history, the Hellenized and Christianized thinkers will seek to track down Deity through 'evidence' of the mind, through 'natural reason' with which every man is endowed at birth, and then to articulate what that Deity must be, *logically speaking*, according to categories of normative philosophical argument: the fact of the causality of motion implies a cause-creator; causal sequence implies a First-in-the-sequence; contingent beings in the world imply a non-contingent or Necessary Being; degrees of perfection in the hierarchy of being imply the existence of a *Maxime Ens*, a Most Perfect Being as the cause of being, goodness, truth, etc. in other beings; and finally, the teleological argument from order and intentionality, which argues that purpose in the world leads *Ratio* to the intentionality of the First Cause—an argument favored later by Immanuel Kant.

⁹⁸ Voltaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, Tome VI, *Philosophie. – Dialogues*. Paris: Furne et Cie., 1847, Ch. 2, 4ff.

⁹⁹ Voltaire, *Discours de l'empereur Julien contre les chrétiens*. Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1994, 149.

¹⁰⁰ Louis Rougier, *Histoire d'une faillite philosophique: la Scolastique*. Hollande: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1966, 63.

¹⁰¹ Frederick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy*, vol. II, *Augustine to Scotus*. NJ: Paulist Press, 1950, 101-105; cf. 137-138.

¹⁰² Boethius, *De Consolatione Philosophiae*. MA: Harvard University Press (Loeb), 1973, I:V 1; cf. III:XI 2, 270; I:VI 110, 166.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, III:II7 232, (=III:VIII99ff); III:X 24ff.

Still deriving from the Medieval conceptual framework and platonic argument, the Christian *Deus* shall evolve as the *bon génie*, the *idea entis perfectissimi* of Descartes' *Metaphysical Meditations*; a Deity who is at once good, and possessed of the status of *génie* or deity, thereby guaranteeing the certitude of the epistemological link that unites our empirical perceptions of the world with the external reality of the world as it truly must be in its existing self. It is only if this is the case, reasons Descartes, that we are able to 'win' (logically) the certainty that the world grasped by our senses corresponds to the *de facto* world that is out there beyond our perceptive field.¹⁰⁴

Of more recent intellectual vintage, it shall be against this very idea of Philosophical Deity—indeed, against this very Christian *Deus*, this *Mutmaßung* or Presumptuous Conjecture¹⁰⁵—that Nietzsche shall finally revolt in a voice strident enough to cause the late nineteenth and twentieth century world to shudder. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* he shall write against "the men of the afterworld": "Oh, my brothers, this God, which I created, was Man-handiwork, Man-madness";¹⁰⁶ and later, speaking from the Blessed Isles and framing his discourse in the self-same referential language—substantially and historically empty—of the Greek philosophers and the later schoolmen, Zarathustra will teach his followers, intoning through images laden with rhetoric and irony, that just as surely as "God is a Thought that makes all that is straight crooked," so now is the time upon them to understand that "all these doctrines about the One and the Plenum, and the Unmoved and the Sufficient, and the Imperishable," are evil and antagonistic to men.¹⁰⁷

These ideal qualities of the Christian *Deus* are, substantially and historically, empty concepts—they have no anchor in a real being. In the first place, as Dawkins points out, there is a non-sequitur relationship between the philosophical idea of a god, and the God that is articulated by the Christian Schoolmen.¹⁰⁸ Secondly, the ideal qualities attributed to the Christian *Deus* do not correspond to the qualities ascribed to the biblical Yahweh—indeed, they contradict the vigorous character and morally ambiguous actions of the bloody national god of the Israelite tribes: for it is Yahweh who orchestrates the cosmic *agon* that will ultimately assure against all comers, both mortal and immortal, his and his people's place in the Land of his inheritance. Finally, the ideal qualities of the Christian *Deus* do not reflect the character and actions of the Most High GOD, whose presence in the Hebrew Bible is more nearly akin to the shadowy presence of a *deus quiescens*, to the retiring El of the Canaanite stories upon whom the character and actions of the Most High GOD were probably originally based.

In *The Secular Bible*, Berlinerblau complains that biblical research does not 'go far enough', that for too long "it has deferred to tradition, censured itself, and refused to pursue the delectably blasphemous implications of its own discoveries."¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁴ René Descartes, *Med.* III fr. 51, 126, in *Méditations Métaphysiques*. Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1979.

¹⁰⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra* in *Sämtliche Werke in zwölf Bänden*, Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner Verlag, 1964, 90.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 90ff. In "On the Blessed Isles" Zarathustra's imagery is, referentially, perhaps at its most "scholastic."

¹⁰⁸ Dawkins, 2006, 77.

¹⁰⁹ Jacques Berlinerblau, Jacques, *The Secular Bible*. NY: Cambridge University Press, 2005, 10, 132.

Yet it really does make “little sense to cling to old and simple articles of faith when so many new and complex possibilities have emerged.” The data clearly substantiate the claim that the Christian *Deus*/God is neither the Most High GOD, nor Elyon, nor the national god of the Israelite tribes, Yahweh; and the data is considerable, deriving from an extensive synthesis and examination of textual as well as contextual materials, of moral argument and character study, as well as of the fruits of the scholastic philosophical tradition. The Christian God is anhistorical—a Hellenistic thought-Deity, stepchild of Plato’s Forms and forebear to Kant’s idealist *Verstandeswesen*, and this concept bears no comparison in character, thought, or deed either to Yahweh, the historico-geographical god of the Hebrew Bible, or, more generally, to the gods of the ancient Near East.

The God of the Christians is neither the Most High GOD of the Ugaritic or Hebrew writings, nor the GREAT GOD of Hellenized religious thought; nor is He Yahweh, the national deity who, from among other local deities of the ancient Near East, stepped decisively into History by association with the Israelite tribes. The God of the Christians is the conception and creation of early Christian philosophers; and just as surely as He is a creature of whole-cloth philosophical speculation, so now, as a profound secularist such as Nietzsche might have said, the time is upon us to understand that the Christian religion, which has grown up to surround and interpret this Philosophical Deity, this truly Unknown God, rather than reflecting any revelation concerning the world of the divine, is really the philosophical achievement of *homo religiosus* caught in the web of a Heraclitan aporia: “Those who approach lifeless things as gods act like a man who holds conversation with houses.”¹¹⁰

¹¹⁰ Heraclitus, *frag. B5* Diels, quoted in Origen, *Contra Celsum*, trans. Henry Chadwick. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953/2003, I:5, p. 9.