

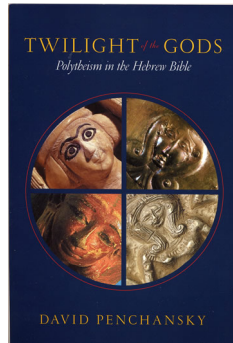
○ REVIEW OF DAVID PENCHANSKY, *TWILIGHT OF THE GODS*

Michael Carden

Honorary Research Adviser, School of History, Philosophy, Religion and Classics, University of Qld, Australia.

Correspondence to Michael Carden: m.carden@uq.edu.au

Michael Carden reviews David Penchansky's *Twilight of the Gods: Polytheism in the Hebrew Bible*. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox; 2005.



In this short volume, Penchansky embarks on a ‘subversive reading’ (91) of the Hebrew scriptures to argue that ‘there exist in the Bible divine forces other than Yahweh’ (51). By doing so he is challenging both the two millennia long reading tradition that assumes the Hebrew scriptures are wholly monotheistic in origin and theme and that this monotheism is fully in accord with the later readers’ monotheisms. He also challenges modern scholarly assumptions of a linear evolution of Israelite paganism/polytheism into radical or exclusive monotheism – Yahweh aloneism. Instead, through a series of readings of biblical texts, Penchansky argues that the religious world encountered here is a variegated one ranging from polytheism and henotheism to varieties of inclusive monotheism and exclusive monotheism of the Yahweh alone variety. Consequently, the story of Israelite religion is not one of a smooth progress to one God but more a ‘struggle... an ongoing process, with back and forth movement’ (xii).

Penchansky’s readings are grouped into two sections – the Gods of Ancient Israel and the Goddesses of Ancient Israel respectively. The first is the longer of the two with five chapters addressing a number of narratives and biblical polemics. In the first chapter, Penchansky presents the story in 2 Kings 3 as one that clearly does not fit a monotheistic worldview. Here is the recounted the Israelite defeat at the hands of the Moabites following Mesha, the Moabite king, sacrificing his son to Chemosh on the walls of his besieged city. A ‘great wrath came upon Israel’ (2 Kings 3.27) causing them to withdraw and return to their own land. Penchansky argues convincingly that this wrath must be from Chemosh, indicating that, for the author of this story, ‘there are many gods, whose strength is enhanced through the sacrifices of their followers’, the more costly the more likely a ‘particular god will overpower competing gods’ (11). In chapter 2,

Penchansky, examines the concept of *miqreh* in 1 Samuel 6 and Qoheleth. Whether it be understood as chance (1 Samuel) or fate (Qoheleth), the use of *miqreh* in these texts represent traces of a worldview in which the gods or One God do not have full control of the universe but co-exist with a third force not subject to divine or human power.

The relationship of Yahweh to the heavenly council is addressed in the following two chapters. The members of the heavenly council are known as the sons of god and in chapter 3, Penchansky examines the way they are represented in Genesis 6, Job, Psalm 89 and 1Kings 22, along with first person plural address in Genesis 2, 3, and 10. Also included in his discussion are the men accompanying the deity in Genesis 18 and who rescue Lot in Genesis 19. These various portraits present the heavenly beings both positively and negatively in relation to Yahweh, the most positive being as extensions of Yahweh in Genesis 18-19 'providing a way for him to be in more than one place at once' (31). When we first encounter Yahweh in Genesis 2, he is Yahweh Elohim, himself one of the sons of god (*elohim*) who consults with them in the creation of humans and their subsequent expulsion from Eden. This perspective is most clear in Deut 32.8-9 where Yahweh is part of the divine council subject to the Most High, Elyon and where Penchansky begins his discussion of the dissolution of the divine council in chapter 4. In psalms 58 and 82 we see the shift whereby Yahweh challenges, accuses and condemns/deposes his fellow divine beings as if to present a 'chronological monotheism... there is only one god now, although it has not always been so' (38). Nevertheless, I agree with Penchansky's conclusion that it would be simplistic to divide up Israel's history 'neatly into early polytheism and later monotheism' (39). Instead they co-exist throughout the historical record, a point I will return to. The fact of this coexistence animates the anti-idolatry polemic in second Isaiah, the subject of chapter 5. The target of this polemic was not the foreign gods of Babylon and other nations but the beliefs and practices of the majority of Israelites who did not subscribe to the innovation of second Isaiah's radical monotheism.

In chapter 6, Penchansky opens the question of Israelite goddesses with an examination of the figure of Hokmah in Proverbs 8.22-31. Most problematic for monotheistic perceptions, is Hokmah's use of language here that presents her as Yahweh's daughter born from him. While later Judaism tries to make Hokmah more of abstraction, Christianity draws on this imagery to describe the relationship of Jesus to the divine as Son of God. Hokmah as goddess/hypostasis in her own right has thus been pushed to the sidelines in Christianity. Thus for modern scholars, particularly those who hold to progressive development of Israel from polytheism to monotheism Hokmah has been a problem. Penchansky surveys a number of scholarly 'solutions' to the problem of Hokmah, which are more revealing of the various authors' monotheistic assumptions than anything else. After Hokmah, Penchansky examines Daughter Zion in chapter 7. He argues that she, too, should be seen as a goddess, a daughter of Yahweh who served as a mediatrix between him and his people. What was interesting for me in this chapter was how much Daughter Zion, the Holy Mountain of Yahweh, revealed the commonalities Israelite religion, as portrayed in the biblical texts, shared with its Syro-Palestinian neighbours. From Yahweh's daughters, Penchansky moves, in chapter 8, to tackle the question of Yahweh's wife/consort – the relationship of Yahweh and Asherah. Unlike the previous chapters, he relies mostly on archaeological evidence, providing only a short survey of biblical references to Asherah. Again he concludes that Yahweh originally had a consort, most likely Asherah, and that consequently Is-

raelite religion was much more diverse than the biblical portrait both would allow and fails to completely suppress.

This book is a very easy read, partly because of its brevity and partly because I suspect it is drawn from public presentations (although the chapter on Hokmah also draws heavily on previous material published by the author). It would be very valuable for courses on 'Israelite' religions and 'the Bible'. The discussion of *miqreh* I found particularly fascinating. However, I have to say I was surprised by the statement in the discussion of Genesis 2-3 in chapter 3 that humans were forbidden both the fruit of the tree of Life as well as the tree of Knowledge (29). I always thought that it was the tree of Knowledge that was out of bounds (Gen. 2.17). It was only when humans ate of it that they were driven out of Eden so that they could no longer access the tree of Life, thus becoming subject to death. I also wish that in his discussion of Asherah he had elaborated more on the Elephantine materials especially as here there seems to be a clear consort, not Asherah but Anat. A more substantial problem I have is the lack of clarity about what Penchansky means when he refers to Israel. Even though he apparently argues that the biblical portrait of Israel is a construction of the biblical authors there are times when he seems to accept that portrait as a given in referring to Iron Age Palestine. Thus in his discussion of Daughter/Lady Zion he argues that there are three stages to the development of Lady Zion theology (73). The first is the Jebusite/non-Israelite component that precedes the second, the incorporation by David of this pagan (?) theology into his royal ideology that remains dominant until the exile during which time Zion is further romanticised. But even if there was a historical David, given that as Penchansky argues, radical monotheism is a late development of Israelite religion (as exemplified by second Isaiah) how can one demarcate between a Jebusite and an Israelite polytheistic religion especially given as how much the figure of Lady Zion reveals the commonalities of Israelite and other Syro-Palestinian religions. I was also confused by the uncertain terminus ad quem Penchansky gives for this Israel and its retrojective project. At times he seems to imply a point in the Hellenistic period but then towards the end of the book he declares that a band of radical monotheists with the support of the Persian king returned from exile and sat down to 'edit the final version of the Hebrew Bible' (87). I would argue that the final version of the Hebrew Bible was edited by the Masorettes after the destruction of the Second Temple, in other words that radical monotheism did not achieve success until the rise of Rabbinic Judaism (and even then it was not a total victory).

There is another deity who lurks on the sidelines of *Twilight* and the Hebrew scriptures alike and whose relationship with Yahweh would have merited further attention. That god is EL, the great high god and father of west Semitic religions, from which Israelite and biblical religion are derived. He is the Most High, Elyon, who presides over the divine council in Deut. 32. He is also the husband of Asherah and is the great Bull (hence the golden bulls set up by Jeroboam at Bethel and Dan, perhaps?). The great archangels of Jewish and Christian tradition are, by their names, aspects of El – Michael, image of El, Gabriel, strength of El or El's champion, Raphael, El heals. In Jewish tradition these three are the men/angels who appeared with the deity at Mamre to Abraham. And what of Yahoel, the heavenly teacher of Abraham in Apocalypse of Abraham – the Yah, the bringing to be, perhaps, of El? Of course, there is also the sinister figure of Azazel (force/ferocity of El?) who in 1 Enoch leads the heavenly beings who come to earth to mate with human women, the trace of which story is retained in Genesis 6. These El theophoric names of the great archangels (who in Jewish and Christian traditions number 7 – echoing the 7 eyes of

the Lord in Zech. 4.10?) belie a complex relationship between El and Yahweh which is part and parcel of the religious struggles behind the biblical and associated texts and from which are derived the great Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. These struggles did not end in the Persian or Hellenistic periods.

In 2005, I reviewed for this eJournal Daniel Boyarin's *Border Lines*, which examined in great depth the struggles over heresy in early Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism, in particular the question of Two Powers in Heaven and the Logos. Boyarin argued convincingly that Two Powers in Heaven, binitarian Logos theology was the Jewish mainstream in the first century before the destruction of the Temple. It was this event plus the rise of Christianity (claiming vindication from it?) that led to a reshaping of Judaism along unitarian or Yahweh alone radical monotheistic lines. Similar struggles were taking place within Christianity but the unitarian/Yahweh alone theology was complicated by the fact that Christians, possibly on Jesus' own authority, identified him with the Logos (Hokmah). It is clear from my own reading of early Christian texts that Jesus, Logos and Yahweh were understood to be the same and by necessity different from Jesus' heavenly Father. Ancient Jewish binitarianism most likely underlies Christian trinitarianism. Radical monotheism was revived in western Christianity following the Reformation (during which time the Hebrew Bible was adopted, with a Christian ordering and without the rich interpretive framework of the Oral Torah, as the Old Testament of the Protestant Bible) and subsequently in the Enlightenment, as One is certainly neater and more reasonable (rationalised) than three, four, seven or ten (or more, including angels, demons, virgin mothers etc). I suspect that much of New Testament studies and the historical Jesus quest is framed by radical monotheistic presumptions and, thus, continues those same ancient struggles that shaped the biblical texts. Islam represents the last great upwelling of radical monotheism, more likely of an El alone rather than a Yahweh alone variety.

All three Abrahamic faiths represent compromises over the vexed questions of the One and the Many. While in Judaism and Islam, it might appear that radical monotheism won out, in reality the radical or exclusive monotheism rests on a variety of compromises with inclusive monotheism, henotheism and even polytheism (Fatima, the Prophet's Daughter, is an important site for these compromises in Islam as are the Shekinah and Kabbalism, and the Virgin Mary for similar compromises in Judaism and Catholic Christianities respectively). In Christianity, radical monotheism found more stony ground and, despite the many and continuing struggles, could never be more than a sectarian phenomenon or an option for the philosophically inclined. Christianity provides too many opportunities for the One to function as and with the Many. One just has to compare the Nicene Creed with the Shema of Judaism and the Shahada of Islam. The latter two are no more than one line each whereas the Christian Creed is a complex elaboration of the One as/in Three.

We live at a time when in all three traditions, exclusivist radical voices are trying to reshape the boundaries of what it means to be a Jew, a Christian or a Muslim in more rigorous and demarcated ways. While the boundaries are defined against the Muslim, Jewish or Christian Other, the impact of such demarcations falls hardest on those on the inside who don't or can't conform to the exclusivist expectations. As Penchansky reminds us (91), scholars such as Regina Schwartz have 'suggested a direct relationship between radical monotheism and intolerant, oppressive attitudes'. Radical exclusivist monotheism drives 'a religion of scarcity where there is not enough god to go around' (Penchansky, 91). Given how much this radical exclusivism goes hand in hand

with rigid, closed readings of texts, Penchansky's book provides a valuable service by opening up the discussions and debates inscribed within the Hebrew scriptures on the relationships of the One and the Many. Reading *Twilight of the Gods* reminds me of Oscar Wilde's observation on artistic truth, which I think equally pertinent to religion – 'a truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true'.