Lecture 1: Israel's Traditions  
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In order to get our bearings, it will be wise to start with an overview of each of these cultures and what they brought with them to this encounter.

We’ll begin with the origins of Israel, talking about the course of its history, the major players, and some of its salient beliefs, particularly about God. Next session we’ll talk about the origins of Judaism.

The tradition of Israel’s origins begins with a man named Abram, and his wife, Sarai (whose names would later be changed to Abraham and Sarah). According to Genesis 12, the LORD issued the following order and pledges: “1Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. 2I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing…. 4So Abram went, as the LORD had told him…. 5Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother’s son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan.”

Let me pause to note, by the way, that the word translated “LORD” (in all caps) is the Hebrew proper name for Israel’s God. It is conventionally translated “LORD” because the name is no longer pronounced. In its place is substituted the Hebrew word for “LORD.” Consequently, when talking about Israel’s God, I will characteristically use the word LORD.

Now, as if those pledges weren’t magnanimous enough, once Abram had arrived in Canaan, the LORD issued a new promise: “7Then the LORD appeared to Abram, and said, “To your offspring I will give this land.” That presented a slight problem, for Abram had no children to be his heir, something he reminds the LORD of in chapter 15: “1Now After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, “Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” 2But Abram said, “O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” … 4But the word of the LORD came to him, “This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir.” He brought him outside and said, “Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your descendants be.”

The promise of descendants had been made, but the fulfillment didn’t seem in the cards. Sarah was getting older, without any signs of pregnancy. And so finally, Sarah availed herself of a practice common in the early 2nd millennium B.C.E.: she offered Abram her own maidservant, Hagar, by whom he could conceive a child. By custom, any child born to a maidservant was considered the child of the wife. The product of this arrangement was a son named Ishmael. Some time later, however, Sarah became pregnant and bore a son named Isaac, after which Sarah expelled Hagar and Ishmael, regarding them as a threat to herself and her son.

Upon Sarah’s death, Isaac took a wife, a woman specially selected for him, named Rebekah. They had two children – indeed, twins: Esau and Jacob. As is true of many siblings, these brothers were quite different from each other. Jacob used those differences to his advantage, stealing the birthright from his elder born twin. As a consequence, Jacob becomes the central figure in the story. In fact, it is he who is awarded the name “Israel,” thus becoming the progenitor of the nation.

Because Jacob had swindled his brother out of his birthright, he found it necessary to leave home to save his life. And so he took up life with relatives some distance from his family and fell in love with one of the daughters, named Rachel. A victim a bit of trickery equal to that Jacob had used with his brother, Jacob woke up the morning after his wedding to find that he had
been wed to Rachel’s older sister, Leah. Needless to say, that did not make Jacob happy, and he quickly made arrangements to take Rachel to wife as well.

Unfortunately, Rachel had difficulty conceiving. Fortunately for Leah, she did not, and she bore Jacob 7 children. Seeing her predicament and relying on the same convention as did Sarah, Rachel gave to Jacob her handmaid Bilhah, by whom Dan and Naphtali were born. Not wanting to be outdone by her little sister, Leah gave to Jacob her handmaid, Zilpah, who bore Gad and Asher. In the meantime, Rachel herself finally conceived two children, giving birth to Joseph and Benjamin.

The twelve brothers of this family constitute the twelve patriarchs of Israel, the putative progenitors of Israel’s twelve tribes.

Of this group, the one who advances the story of Israel’s origins most is Joseph. As you no doubt know, Joseph had some rather startling dreams about his future preeminence over his brothers, and he unwisely chose to share them with his family. For some reason, his brothers were not equally euphoric over these prospects, especially after hearing Joseph recount several variations of that dream. Aggravating this situation, Joseph was their father’s favorite, as shown especially by their father’s gift to him of a specially tailored robe. Having had enough, they arranged for a one-way trip for Joseph down to Egypt, selling him into the hands of foreign traders who were heading south.

After going through a bit of adversity, including being brought up on charges of attempted rape of his master’s wife, Joseph distinguished himself by interpreting a dream that had haunted Pharaoh – a dream portending 7 years of famine, but also foretelling 7 years of plenty preceding that, during which Egypt could prepare itself for the coming drought. As a reward for resolving his conundrum, Pharaoh made Joseph second in command, with oversight of the storage of supplies for the portended famine.

During the famine, Joseph’s brothers traveled to Egypt in search of food, and wound up bowing down before him, thus fulfilling the predictions of Joseph’s dreams as a young man. Ultimately, he invited his entire family to come for a visit and they did. And, like most families so invited, they stayed. Indeed, long after Joseph had passed from the scene they were there, but had been made into slaves.

It was with the appearance of Moses, and the series of 10 plagues, that those who would become Israel gained their freedom, with Moses leading them on an Exodus out of Egypt, towards the promised land of Canaan. However, within striking distance of their land, the majority of the people balked at the challenge that awaited them, and they were consigned by the LORD to wander for 40 years until that generation died off, including Moses.

When once again they stood poised to enter their land, they were under new leadership: that of Joshua, who led them on a campaign to claim the land, beginning with Jericho.

By around 1100 B.C.E., the tribes descended from Jacob possessed, to one degree or another, various tracts of the land that came to be known as Israel. However, they still faced opposition from those native to the land, as well as others intent on their removal.

In this earliest dawn of Israel’s existence, the various tribes had their own leaders and local champions, who led the people in times of distress. The stories of those local, tribal heroes are collected in the book of Judges, even though the term “judge” is not really appropriate for these champions, who had little to do with administering justice.

The one adversary offering the most concentrated and stubborn opposition to the band of tribes was the cities of the Philistines, a group of immigrants from the Aegean region who had arrived slightly before the tribes. Ultimately, the tribes decided that they needed a permanent
leader to mobilize them, and they chose a man named Saul to become their first king, although he was more a central military leader than a king.

Their first true king, David, came to the throne around 1000 B.C.E. It was he who captured Jerusalem and made it the capital; although it remained his private city rather than the possession of any one tribe. When David died in 933, his son Solomon succeeded him. Solomon carried out a series of building projects that included the Jerusalem Temple and a palace for himself. During his reign, Israel was strong militarily and prosperous economically. It enjoyed its broadest borders and widest influence it would know.

However, massive building projects and military prowess came at a price – one too heavy for those in the northern tribes, who saw little benefit from the grand buildings and power that Solomon amassed. The only repercussion they felt was the heavy tax burden. And so, when Solomon died in 922, they appealed to his son and successor to lighten the load. When he flippantly dismissed their advice, they revolted, leaving the southern tribes of Benjamin and Judah to go it on their own.

Over the next 200 years the two nations rode the undulations of a love/hate relationship. Many years saw peace between the two kingdoms, but there were occasional skirmishes and even sinister plots, the most fateful of which took place in the last third of the 8th century.

The 8th century B.C.E. dawned with a number of remarkable developments. For one thing, there is evidence of a spread of literacy during that century. Moreover, it was during that century that some prophets turned from speaking to just the royal household to speak also to the masses. Among these 8th century “writing prophets” (so-called because we have a written record of their messages) were Amos and Hosea, both of whom spoke in the northern kingdom, and Isaiah and Micah, both of whom spoke in the south.

But another force, more sinister and terrifying began to surface in the 8th century, and by mid-century was making its harsh presence felt in the land of Israel. The ancient Mesopotamian power of Assyria began to revive and, by century’s end, had fairly well engulfed the nations of the fertile crescent, including the twin capitals of Samaria and Jerusalem.

It was around mid-century that the northern kingdom began paying tribute to the mighty empire of the east. Then in 733 B.C.E., as the result of a plot against Judah (and ultimately Assyria) sponsored by Israel and its northern neighbor, Aram, Israel was put on even more tenuous terms with Assyria. Then, in 722, Israel revolted again, and the Assyrians dissolved the nation and exiled its most prominent citizens. The result was that Judah alone was left.

In spite of being under Assyria’s thumb, however, Judah prospered fairly well. In 715 a new king, Hezekiah, came to the throne. A strong leader, Hezekiah made overtures to those left in the north to come live in Judah. In fact, archaeological remains indicate that during this period Hezekiah expanded the walls of Jerusalem to shelter more people.

And yet, these maneuvers appear to have been more than simply humanitarian acts. For Hezekiah also did something not imagined before: he centralized worship in Jerusalem, closing down that outlying worship sites, or “high places.” The centralization of all worship in Jerusalem was more than just a religious act; it was also political. For to require that all sacrifices be offered in Jerusalem was to fix national life even more firmly on the capital city.

Also indicative of Hezekiah’s political designs is the fact that he arranged the digging of a tunnel to supply people inside of Jerusalem with water during time of siege. And then he withheld tribute to Assyria.

When the Assyrians swooped down in 701, they demolished all of the outlying villages and cities, and laid siege to Jerusalem. The final outcome appears to have been something of a
stalemate. Jerusalem was allowed to survive, but with heavy reparations paid to the Assyrians for all their troubles. Moreover, the sorts of politically-laced moves Hezekiah had made were undone, if not by Hezekiah himself, then certainly by his son, Manasseh, who came to the throne early in the 7th century and ruled for 45 years. He brought back the varieties of foreign religious cults that the people had known before, bringing on himself the disdain of those who championed his father’s reforms.

Manasseh successor, his son, Amon, was assassinated after only a couple years. In his stead ruled his son, Josiah. Josiah reinstalled many of the changes his great grandfather, Hezekiah, had introduced. Only he did so explicitly following a document referred to as “the book of the Law,” undoubtedly a form of the book of Deuteronomy which had incorporated the centralization of worship that Hezekiah had introduced as one of its central demands.

One reason Josiah was successful in launching these reforms was that Assyria was in its death-throws. A major reason for that was that another ancient Mesopotamian power, Babylon, was regaining strength and presented a mortal threat to Assyria. In fact, in 613 B.C.E. the Babylonians destroyed Nineveh, the capital of the Assyrian empire. From there they began to move west towards the Mediterranean. In response, the Egyptian Pharaoh, Neco, moved his forces northward towards Carchemish in an attempt to cut off the Babylonian advance. Josiah had been in league with the Babylonians in their ploy to cut off Assyria at the knees, and so moved to intercept the Egyptians at Megiddo.

Unfortunately for him, that proved a fatal decision. Josiah died in battle and the Judeans came under Egypt’s control – but not for long, for by 600 B.C.E. the whole region, except Egypt, was under Babylonian rule.

During the first dozen years of the 6th century the prophet Jeremiah proclaimed to the people of Jerusalem that Judah would eventually be destroyed by Babylon because of all its sins. Among the exiles already in Babylon, the prophet Ezekiel sounded the same warning.

Judah’s fateful day came in 587, when it rebelled against its Babylonian overlords one two many times. The Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem and carted off to Babylon many of Judah’s remaining citizens. The life of an independent state composed of people descended from Abraham was at an end. None of their posterity would know self-rule until the middle of the 2nd century B.C.E., that is, until the revolt lead by the brothers Maccabee against their Greek overlords. For now, Jerusalem stood as a pile of rubble.

Those, then, are the bare bones of the origins of Israel and its history. But what Israel bequeathed to Judaism was more than just this history; it also bestowed a treasure of beliefs, particularly about its God. I’ll highlight four of the most prominent of these.

Perhaps the belief most frequently associated with Judaism is monotheism: the rigorous insistence that there is one – and only one – God. It is commonly assumed that Judaism inherited its monotheism from ancient Israel. Well, that all depends on where you define the transition from ancient Israel to Judaism, which is a debated issue. Next time I will argue that enough significant changes occur between the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 and the reestablishment of a people in the land and a rebuilding of the temple some 70 years later to consider Judaism to be born during the exile in Babylon.

If that is the case, then monotheism was not something bequeathed to Judaism by ancient Israel, but was a product of the exile that also produced early Judaism. For it is only in the words of the prophet who speaks in Isaiah 40-55 – conventionally dubbed “Deutero-Isaiah” – that we find monotheism unequivocally stated for the first time, as for example in 44.6: “Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel, and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: I am the first and I am the last;
besides me there is no god.” Here we have an explicit statement of monotheism – “besides me there is no god” – something we do not find prior to this time.

Admittedly, these words are reminiscent of the ones that open the Decalogue in Exodus 20: “I am the L ORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me.” The command, “you shall have no other gods before me” seems parallel to the assertion of Isaiah 44, “besides me there is no god.” And yet those similar sounding words have two very different meanings.

For one thing, note that while Isaiah 44.6 makes a categorical assertion (“no other God exists”), Exodus 20 commands people regarding their behavior (“you shall worship no other God”); it is possible to worship only one God without denying the existence of other deities.

A distinction between these two passages also lies in the meaning of the phrase translated “before me.” Among the various options that have been discussed for this phrase, none can be pushed to make this mean “no other God exists.” I.e. what’s mandated here is not monotheism, but monolatry, the worship of one deity, even though there are others one might worship.

A striking statement that admits the existence of other gods, and yet asserts the supremacy of Israel’s God, especially over Israel is Deuteronomy 32.8-9: “When the Most High apportioned the nations, when he divided humankind, he fixed the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the gods; the L ORD’s own portion was his people, Jacob his allotted share.” While this statement accords Israel’s God the role of setting the boundaries of the peoples, it has him dividing up the nations proportionate to “the number of the gods” and preserving Israel as his allotted share. I.e. there are various deities, each of whom is appointed a nation. Among these deities, Israel belongs to the L ORD, by his own choice.

An even more explicit statement about the existence of other gods is found in the book of Psalms, chapter 82: “1 God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment: 2 How long will you judge unjustly and show partiality to the wicked? 3 Give justice to the weak and the orphan; maintain the right of the lowly and the destitute. 4 Rescue the weak and the needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked.” 5 They have neither knowledge nor understanding, they walk around in darkness; all the foundations of the earth are shaken. 6 I say, “You are gods, children of the Most High, all of you; 7 nevertheless, you shall die like mortals, and fall like any prince.”

The idea of “the divine council” was common in the ANE. It was a meeting of all deities to consider their plans. In this scene, as in similar ones found in literary remains from some of Israel’s neighbors, the supreme deity takes the other members of the divine council to task for their failures. Notice that the God of Israel does so “in the midst of the gods,” reproaching them for their failure to protect the powerless. And those he upbraids for their short-comings are called “gods, children of the Most High,” just as in the literature of peoples surrounding Israel other deities were spoken of as the children of the chief deity.

So the notion of monotheism does not appear to have been standard in Israel prior to the exile. Instead, we find monolatry: a persistent emphasis on worshipping only the L ORD, even though other deities were at hand.

Despite the admission that Israel’s God was not the only deity, Israel did not appeal to a multiplicity of deities to account for the existence of evil. In fact, quite strikingly, they consistently attributed even morally ambiguous situations to the L ORD, as (for instance) when the L ORD responds to Moses’ attempt to sidestep the call to lead Israel out of Egypt by invoking his inability to speak well: “Then the L ORD said to him, “Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the L ORD?”
Notice that the LORD embraces physical challenges as his own creation. There is no reluctance about assigning to Israel’s God such infirmities.

Even more peculiar is an incident narrated just a few verses later, as Moses and his wife are on their way to Egypt: 24On the way, at a place where they spent the night, the LORD met him and tried to kill him. 25But Zipporah took a flint and cut off her son’s foreskin, and touched Moses’ feet with it, and said, “Truly you are a bridegroom of blood to me!” 26So he let him alone. It was then she said, “A bridegroom of blood by circumcision.”

Even if this incident is linked to the need for circumcision – a requirement Moses doesn’t know about at this point – it is nevertheless a depiction of Israel’s God as unpredictably malevolent, here attacking even the one he has just sent to deliver his people.

Something equally striking takes place in this narrative from 2 Samuel 24: 1Again the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, “Go, count the people of Israel and Judah.” 2So the king said to Joab and the commanders of the army, who were with him, “Go through all the tribes of Israel, from Dan to Beer-sheba, and take a census of the people, so that I may know how many there are.”

This incident is cast as something the LORD incited David to do against Israel because of the LORD’s anger against the nation. We aren’t told why the LORD was angry, nor why taking a census was disadvantageous, although we do know that numbering the people was not simply for statistical data, but in preparation for levying taxes, conscripting men for military service, or rounding up forced workers for public building projects. In any case, David’s military advisor, Joab, considered it an act of folly, and told the king so. Against Joab’s advice, David went ahead with the census. Only in the wake of the census did he conclude that it was a course of action he should not have taken: 10But afterward, David was stricken to the heart because he had numbered the people. David said to the LORD, “I have sinned greatly in what I have done. But now, O LORD, I pray you, take away the guilt of your servant; for I have done very foolishly.” 11When David rose in the morning, the word of the LORD came to the prophet Gad, David’s seer, saying, 12“Go and say to David: Thus says the LORD: Three things I offer you; choose one of them, and I will do it to you.” 13So Gad came to David and told him; he asked him, “Shall three years of famine come to you on your land? Or will you flee three months before your foes while they pursue you? Or shall there be three days’ pestilence in your land? Now consider, and decide what answer I shall return to the one who sent me.” 14Then David said to Gad, “I am in great distress; let us fall into the hand of the LORD, for his mercy is great; but let me not fall into human hands.”

Notice that David does not characterize his act as simply a strategic or political blunder, but as a sin, and he confesses it as such to the LORD. In response, the LORD gives David his choice of punishments, and David decides to let the LORD determine how to deal with his guilt, out of his belief that the LORD will be merciful. So even the LORD agrees that this was a sin in need of punishment, even though it was the LORD that incited David to do this.

Again, ancient Israel seems to have had little reticence about ascribing what we would consider morally questionable actions to its god. In fact, often in the Psalms people assume that if they are suffering, it must be the LORD who imposed it, and so they ask him to relent. The relationship between Israel’s god and evil is not as unambiguous as we’re perhaps accustomed to thinking.

However, also embedded in David’s conviction about the LORD’s mercy is another staple of ancient Israel’s beliefs, highlighted especially in the fallout of David’s choice narrated in vv. 15-16: 15So the LORD sent a pestilence on Israel from that morning until the appointed time; and
seventy thousand of the people died, from Dan to Beer-sheba.  

16 But when the angel stretched out his hand toward Jerusalem to destroy it, the LORD relented concerning the evil, and said to the angel who was bringing destruction among the people, “It is enough; now stay your hand.”

There are two strikingly different statements about the duration of the plague. While v. 15 suggests that the pestilence persisted until it had run the prescribed course (“from that morning until the appointed time” - which was earlier specified as 3 days), v. 16 notes a different endpoint for the pestilence: “but when the angel stretched out his hand toward Jerusalem to destroy it, the LORD relented concerning the evil.”

This, of course, relates to David’s expectation that the LORD would be merciful. However, it is also a striking assertion about God’s operation: that God can be persuaded not to do what he has determined to do. This underscores a feature of ancient Israelite belief that we need to note: the assumption of meaningful engagement with God. However threatening or ambiguous the LORD’s actions might be on one plane, there was always the possibility of persuading him to change course. In fact, the phrase here translated, “the LORD relented,” occurs numerous times in literature prior to the exile.

An especially bold example is found in the interchange between the prophet Amos and the LORD in Amos 7.1-6, where Amos reports receiving the following visions and engaging in these accompanying conversations:  

1 This is what the Lord GOD showed me: he was forming locusts at the time the latter growth began to sprout (it was the latter growth after the king’s mowings).  

[I.e. he had a vision of the crops being destroyed by a locust infestation]  

2 When they had finished eating the grass of the land, I said, O Lord GOD, forgive, I beg you! How can Jacob stand? He is so small!”  

3 The LORD relented concerning this; It shall not be,” said the LORD.  

[Now the second vision:]  

4 This is what the Lord GOD showed me: the Lord GOD was calling for a shower of fire, and it devoured the great deep and was eating up the land.  

[This time Amos’ vision is of all vegetation being destroyed by drought]  

5 Then I said, O Lord GOD, cease, I beg you! How can Jacob stand? He is so small!”  

6 The LORD relented concerning this; This also shall not be,” said the Lord GOD.”

The phrases “the LORD relented concerning this” reflect the same Hebrew words we noted in 2 Samuel 24, and again denote the LORD changing his mind about a course of action, this time due to the appeals of the prophet Amos. This sort of meaningful engagement, influencing God’s plans so that deity is not viewed as having charted an unchanging path – is also a frequent feature of ancient Israel’s religion.

Of course, enlivening this sort of interaction is another fundamental assumption of Israel’s faith: that communication between God and humans is immediate and direct. This is especially noticeable in the stories of the patriarchs in the book of Genesis. E.g. Genesis 18 narrates the following visit paid to Abraham:  

1 The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day.  

2 He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground.  

3 He said, “My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant.  

4 Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest your-selves under the tree.  

5 Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on —since you have come to your servant.” So they said, “Do as you have said.”

Once Abraham has prepared the meal and as his visitors were eating, the following exchange occurs:  

9 They said to him, “Where is your wife Sarah?” And he said, “There, in the tent.”  

10 Then one said, “I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.” And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him.  

11 Now Abraham and Sarah were old,
advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. 12 So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?”

Is anything too wonderful for the L ORD? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.”

Note how this narrative is introduced: “1 The L ORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day.” Giving this billing, we are surprised at what he, in fact, sees: “2 He looked up and saw three men standing near him.” What does the appearance of three men have to do with an appearance by the L ORD?

In the course of the dialogue, one of the three men makes a promise to Abraham: “I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.” That promise is repeated a few lines later. More significant than the repetition, however, is to whom the statement is attributed as it is introduced in v. 13: “The L ORD said to Abraham….” And yet the speaker is one of the three visitors.

Obviously, what’s striking about this narrative is the ease with which these three visitors are spoken of as “an appearance of the L ORD” and equally how easily their words are equated with the speech of the L ORD himself. This kind of free-and-easy interchange attests a blurring of the distinction between divine and human, in which a being in human form can stand and speak for the L ORD.

Another example of this sort of easy interchange between God and humans appears in the story of the announcement of Samson’s conception in Judges 13, which begins this way: “2 There was a certain man of Zorah, of the tribe of the Danites, whose name was Manoah. His wife was barren, having borne no children. 3 And the angel of the L ORD appeared to the woman and said to her, “Although you are barren, having borne no children, you shall conceive and bear a son. 4 Now be careful not to drink wine or strong drink, or to eat anything unclean, 5 for you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor is to come on his head, for the boy shall be a nazirite to God from birth. It is he who shall begin to deliver Israel from the hand of the Philistines.” Then the woman came and told her husband, “A man of God came to me, and his appearance was like that of an angel of God, most awe-inspiring; I did not ask him where he came from, and he did not tell me his name.”

Not having been at the appearance, Manoah prayed that the “man of God” would be allowed to make a return visit. When he appears, Manoah is again absent, and so his wife runs to get him. When he arrives, he asks for a repetition of the instructions the man had given his wife, following which Manoah makes this request: “15 Allow us to detain you, and prepare a kid for you.” 16 The angel of the L ORD said to Manoah, “If you detain me, I will not eat your food; but if you want to prepare a burnt offering, then offer it to the L ORD.” (For Manoah did not know that he was the angel of the L ORD.) Then Manoah said to the angel of the L ORD, “What is your name, so that we may honor you when your words come true?” 18 But the angel of the L ORD said to him, “Why do you ask my name? It is too wonderful.” 19 So Manoah took the kid with the grain offering, and offered it on the rock to the L ORD, to him who works wonders. 20 When the flame went up toward heaven from the altar, the angel of the L ORD ascended in the flame of the altar while Manoah and his wife looked on; and they fell on their faces to the ground. 21 The angel of the L ORD did not appear again to Manoah and his wife. Then Manoah realized that it was the angel of the L ORD. 22 And Manoah said to his wife, “We shall surely die, for we have seen God.”
You’ll recall that in her initial report Manoah’s wife had described the visitor not only as “a man of God,” but also as having an appearance “like that of an angel of God, most awe-inspiring,” although she admitted, “I did not ask him where he came from, and he did not tell me his name.”

The narrator takes special pains to point out that Manoah didn’t catch on to the man’s identity, by inserting a parenthetical comment to that effect: “For Manoah did not know that he was the angel of the LORD.” In fact, Manoah doesn’t reach that conclusion until his interaction with the messenger has ended in a spectacular way, with the messenger ascending in the fire Manoah has built for the sacrifice: “Then Manoah realized that it was the angel of the LORD.”

What’s most significant, however, is how Manoah responds to this realization: with the exclamation, “We shall surely die, for we have seen God.” The notion that death is the penalty for laying eyes on God is stated frequently enough in the Bible. And yet it is chiefly voiced only to overturn it, as here, where Manoah’s wife calms his fears with the logic, “If the LORD had meant to kill us, he would not have accepted a burnt offering and a grain offering at our hands, or shown us all these things, or now announced to us such things as these.”

So often are fears about seeing the deity overturned in the Bible as to support the contention that ancient Israel considered itself often enough granted the possibility of immediate, if unexpected, access to its God.

In summary, then, four beliefs characteristic of ancient Israel that I have highlighted are these: Israel’s adoption of monolatry, while conceding the existence of other deities; its embrace of what we might call a morally ambiguous relationship between the LORD and evil; third, belief in meaningful engagement with its God, in which divine plans were open to human appeal; and lastly, its characteristic experience of communication with God as immediate and direct.

Next time we’ll explore how these convictions of ancient Israel’s religion contributed to the origins of Judaism.