As you’ll recall, at the end of last session we were concluding our overview of Israel’s origins by looking at four beliefs about God that seem to have been widespread in ancient Israel - that is, before the exile that began in 587 B.C.E. with the fall of Jerusalem.

We had noted that ancient Israel did not hold to full-blown monotheism prior to the exile, but rather embraced monolatry, the worship of one God, although the existence of other deities was not disputed.

At the same time, we also noted that ancient Israel did not take advantage of the admission that other gods existed to account for the existence of evil. Evils in the world were not explained by attributing them to other deities. Israel did not shy away from connecting God and evil. For them, everything they knew and experienced came from the LORD, and thus they did not hesitate to attribute to him actions we would see as highly sinister.

At the same time, as we had just concluded reviewing, ancient Israel assumed meaningful engagement with their god - engagement that could change the course of God’s actions. And thus we find the language we noted about God “relenting concerning” something he had proposed or planned, as a result of human appeals for him to reverse course.

Of course, enlivening this sort of interaction is a fourth basic assumption of Israel’s faith we must consider: 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 a visit paid to Abraham one day by three men, whom he implored to stop and share a meal with him.

We’ll read about this scene shortly, but first let’s notice that once Abraham had prepared the meal and his visitors are eating, the following exchange took place: “9They said to him, “Where is your wife Sarah?” And he said, “There, in the tent.” 10Then 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. 11Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. 12So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, “After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?” 13The LORD said to Abraham, “Why did Sarah laugh, and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’ 14Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.”

Now let’s note how this narrative is introduced: “1The LORD 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: “2He looked up and saw three men standing near him.” What does the arrival of three men have to do with an appearance by the LORD?

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 LORD said to Abraham…” And yet the speaker is one of the three visitors.

What’s striking about this narrative is the ease with which these visitors are spoken of as “an appearance of the LORD” and how easily their words are equated with the speech of the LORD. This kind of free-and-easy interchange attests a blurring of the boundaries between divine and human, so that a being in human form can stand and speak as the LORD.
Another example of this sort of immediate interchange between the Divine and humans appears in the forecast of Samson’s conception in Judges 13, which begins this way: “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. And the angel of the LORD appeared to the woman and said to her, “Although you are barren, having borne no children, you shall conceive and bear a son…. 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. Unfortunately, when he does so, Manoah is again absent, and so his wife runs to get him. When he arrives, he asks the man to repeat the instructions he had given his wife, following which Manoah makes this request: “Allow us to detain you, and prepare a kid for you.” The angel of the LORD 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 LORD.” (For Manoah did not know that he was the angel of the LORD.) Then Manoah said to the angel of the LORD, “What is your name, so that we may honor you when your words come true?” But the angel of the LORD said to him, “Why do you ask my name? It is too wonderful.” So Manoah took the kid with the grain offering, and offered it on the rock to the LORD, to him who works wonders. When the flame went up toward heaven from the altar, the angel of the LORD ascended in the flame of the altar while Manoah and his wife looked on; and they fell on their faces to the ground. The angel of the LORD did not appear again to Manoah and his wife. Then Manoah realized that it was the angel of the LORD. And Manoah said to his wife, “We shall surely die, for we have seen God.”

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 realize that 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. Again we have a case of immediate communication with the divine realm, the final of the four characteristic beliefs widespread in ancient Israel.

Let’s turn to the origins of Judaism. Naturally, a crucial question is, “When does Judaism begin?” And yet, the answer is not clear-cut. The earliest occurrence of the term yeḥudim “(meaning, properly, Judahites) is in literature from the time after the exile. That is when it becomes, in effect, an ethnic label, “the Jews,” without regard to which ancient tribe a person traced their roots. However, it was only once the Greeks came to dominate the world that we find the abstract term “Judaism,” Ioudaismos, Accordingly, some would date the beginning of Judaism to the Hellenistic era.

If, however, we think in terms of forging a set of priorities and conceptions that become constitutive of Judaism, setting it off from the religion of ancient Israel, I think we can date its origins to the period when some of those exiled to Babylon began returning to their homeland.

To pick up the story of Israel after the exile, the Neo-Babylonian Empire did not survive long after the death of its dominant ruler, Nebuchadnezzar. In fact, to back track a bit, one of the factors enabling Nebuchadnezzar’s predecessor, Nabopolassar, to crush the Assyrian Empire was his alliance with a pair of nations to the east, Media and Persia. Their initial attempt to depose Assyria around 650 failed. But by around 620 fortunes had turned, and the alliance between Babylon and the Medes crushed Assyria, destroying its capital, Nineveh, in 613 B.C.E.
These allies lived side-by-side, until the death of Nebuchadnezzar in 562 and the rise of a young Persian ruler named Cyrus II a couple of years later. After solidifying his rule by 550 B.C.E., he turned his sites west, spreading Persian rule throughout Asia Minor to the Aegean sea. Having accomplished that by 540, Cyrus turned on the now weakened Babylon, conquered it, and thereby established Persian rule throughout Mesopotamia, Egypt, Asia Minor and parts north. As you may already know, the one persistent hold-out was the Greek mainland, which never succumbed to Persian domination, in spite of several close calls. The Persians held sway over the Mediterranean world for two centuries, until the rise of Alexander the Great, who conquered the Persians in establishing his own empire.

The onset of Persian rule is a watershed event in the origins of Judaism, for it is with this changing of the guard that we see the development of several features that come to be characteristic of Judaism. One that I mentioned last time is the development of full-blown monotheism. With one fell swoop, the prophet dubbed who speaks in Isaiah 40-55, Deutero-Isaiah, declared any other gods non-existent.

Deutero-Isaiah addressed people facing circumstances novel in Israel’s history. Jerusalem lay in ruins and its kingdom had disintegrated. In the culture of the ANE, the defeat of one’s nation by another was not simply a national disgrace, but also a disgrace of one’s gods. The triumph of another nation over yours was also a triumph of their gods over your gods.

Accordingly, for the many citizens of Judah who had been transported to Babylon, it was difficult to avoid the conclusion that the LORD had been shown inferior to Babylon’s gods.

Little wonder, then, that one of the tasks Deutero-Isaiah undertook was to restore people’s faith in their God. Repeatedly he asks to whom or what his audience might liken their God, and then strikes down any possible comparison, as in chapter 40, vv. 18-20: “18 To whom then will you liken God, or what likeness compare with him? 19 An idol? — A workman casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold, and casts for it silver chains. 20 As a gift one chooses mulberry wood, wood that will not rot — then seeks out a skilled artisan to set up an image that will not topple.”

The use of images as vehicles for a god’s presence was commonplace in Mesopotamian religion. The prophet here lampoons idols and any possibility of comparing them to the LORD by reminding his hearers that idols are simply a workman’s product that has to be constructed carefully so that it won’t rot or topple.

By contrast, he chidingly reminds his audience, “21 Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth? 22 It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to live in; 23 who brings princes to naught, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.”

That sort of contrast between the Babylonian deities as nothing and the L ORD as the all-powerful potentate of Israel was one way Deutero-Isaiah tried to shake his audience from lack of faith in their God. Indeed, elsewhere he implicitly denies the existence of these competing deities, as in 41.23-24, where he mockingly addresses the rival gods: “23 Tell us what is to come hereafter, that we may know that you are gods; do good, or do harm, that we may be afraid and terrified. 24 You, indeed, are nothing and your work is nothing at all; whoever chooses you is an abomination.

Numerous times Deutero-Isaiah portrays the L ORD putting the Babylonian deities to this sort of challenge and finding them wanting. It’s not just that they are inferior deities; they are no deities, they are non-existent.
Deutero-Isaiah presses this argument even more rigorously, by explicitly asserting that the LORD is the sole existing deity. Thus, Deutero-Isaiah delivers this oracle on God’s behalf to his audience: “You are my witnesses, says the LORD, and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me.”

A little later he even forecasts that the nations will recognize that the LORD alone is God: “Thus says the LORD: The wealth of Egypt and the merchandise of Ethiopia, and the Sabæans, tall of stature, shall come over to you and be yours, they shall follow you; they shall come over in chains and bow down to you. They will make supplication to you, saying, “God is with you alone, and there is no other; there is no god besides him.”

This explicit monotheism – denying even the existence of any other deity – is thus the product of the exilic period, when Deutero-Isaiah found it necessary to assert forcefully the LORD’s preeminence over the deities of Mesopotamia to the point of denying the existence of any other god. And such insistence becomes a classic mark of Judaism.

Another characteristic element of Judaism that appears for the first time during the exilic and post-exilic era is the centrality of the Torah.

While it’s easy to get the impression, from reading Exodus through Deuteronomy, that the Torah was front-and-center throughout Israel’s history, evidence from the literature we know comes from before the exile undermines that appearance. E.g. although the prophet Isaiah speaks of “torah,” he never uses that word for a body of legal codes that the people should follow. Rather, in Isaiah’s diction, “Torah” always refers to his own teaching, as e.g. in his summons of 1.10: “Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom! Listen to the teaching of our God, you people of Gomorrah!”

The Hebrew word “Torah” is present in the word “the teaching of our God,” which stands parallel to “the word of the LORD.” God’s Torah here is nothing less than the prophetic word that Isaiah announces and to which the people need to pay attention.

Similarly, in 5.24 Isaiah accuses the people of having “rejected the instruction (hr/T) of the LORD of hosts” and having “despised the word of the Holy One of Israel.” Again it is the prophetic word he has in view, not a written legal code. And this sort of use of Torah for the prophetic word is characteristic of Isaiah. Indeed, nowhere does he call on the people to return to obedience to the Torah as some sort of written code.

And that is characteristic of the prophets before the exile as a whole. While certain of them show familiarity with some of the individual prescriptions that come to be embedded in the Torah, none of them even hints at familiarity with the Torah as a complete composition with which their audience should be familiar.

The first time we find the Torah being pressed as a standard to which Israel is accountable is in the books of Joshua through Kings, where we find references to “the book of the law of Moses” or simply “this book of the law.” E.g. David’s last words to Solomon on his death bed begin thus: “I am about to go the way of all the earth. Be strong, be courageous, and keep the charge of the LORD your God, walking in his ways and keeping his statutes, his commandments, his ordinances, and his testimonies, as it is written in the law of Moses, so that you may prosper in all that you do and wherever you turn.”

The “law of Moses” is to be the foundation for all of Solomon’s behavior. This, in fact, accords with the standards established for a king in Deuteronomy 17: “When he has taken the throne of his kingdom, he shall have a copy of this law written for him in the presence of the levitical priests. It shall remain with him and he shall read in it all the days of his life, so that he
may learn to fear the LORD his God, diligently observing all the words of this law and these statutes.”

Intriguingly, the language we find woven throughout Joshua through Kings about “this book of the law” and “the book of the law of Moses” is language only one book in the Torah uses to describe itself: the book of Deuteronomy. Moreover, on every occasion when Joshua through 2 Kings refers to “the book of the law” and cites a particular stipulation, that stipulation can always be traced back to the book of Deuteronomy.

If, then, this language about “the book of the law of Moses” and “this book of the law” appears only in Joshua through Kings and, in the Pentateuch, only in Deuteronomy, then that suggests some sort of connection between those books. And for a variety of reasons, scholars have discerned that what we find in Joshua through 2 Kings is a history of Israel that has been written by people who adhered to the book of Deuteronomy as their guide, but apparently not in combination with the other books we know from the Pentateuch.

Moreover, for a variety of reasons, this story of Israel, evaluated in light of the book of Deuteronomy, seems to have been produced – at least in the form we have it – rather late in Israel’s life. Indeed, the final stage of editing it occurred during the exilic period in an attempt to explain why Jerusalem, like Samaria and the northern kingdom had fallen.

The final answer deduced was that Israel had failed to be faithful to the law given to Moses, and Joshua through Kings tells its story from that perspective, even though that is not a perspective that dominated life before the fall of Jerusalem.

In this story of Israel, even the prophets become messengers of the Torah, as stated e.g. in 2 Kings 17.13-14: “13 Yet the LORD warned Israel and Judah by every prophet and every seer, saying, “Turn from your evil ways and keep my commandments and my statutes, in accordance with all the law that I commanded your ancestors and that I sent to you by my servants the prophets.” 14 They would not listen but were stubborn, as their ancestors had been, who did not believe in the LORD their God.”

The pre-exilic prophets would likely have been quite startled by this definition of their role, since they never mention the Torah, its commandments and statutes. And yet the authors of Joshua-Kings accord them this role because the Torah – at least as propounded by Deuteronomy – had come to be seen as the fundamental expression of the divine will.

The culmination of this concentration on the Torah as the complete expression of the divine will is found in the work of Ezra, a scribe remembered as having played a significant role in shaping the ethos of the Jerusalem community around 400 B.C.E. Nehemiah 7.73b-8.8 describes Ezra’s leadership on a particular day: “7.73b When the seventh month came – the people of Israel being settled in their towns – 8.1 all the people gathered together into the square before the Water Gate. They told the scribe Ezra to bring the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had given to Israel. 2 Accordingly, the priest Ezra brought the law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could hear with understanding…. 4The scribe Ezra stood on a wooden platform that had been made for the purpose…. 5And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was standing above all the people; and when he opened it, all the people stood up. 6Then Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, “Amen, Amen,” lifting up their hands. Then they bowed their heads and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground…. 8So they read from the book, from the law of God, with interpretation. They gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.”

Two features of this narrative are noteworthy. First, the image of Ezra here is different than in the account of his activities in the book of Ezra. There he is charged by the Persians with
overseeing the enforcement of Jewish law and the King’s law. While he corrects errant practices, he does not conduct the sort of large-scale educational mission depicted here.

The second noteworthy feature of this narrative is its liturgical flavor. All the people of Jerusalem assemble at a particular spot on the first day of the new year (the first day of the month Tishri) and call on Ezra to bring out the Law of Moses. Notice that when Ezra opens the scroll of the Law, all the people respond by standing. Then Ezra voices a blessing of the Lord, to which the people answer, “Amen, Amen,” lifting up their hands and then bowing down, their faces towards the ground. Most scholars perceive this formal liturgy as most likely having been imposed by the author, who constructed this narrative of Ezra as a great expounder of the Law, using patterns of worship that were familiar to him.

The most striking feature of this liturgy is the respect accorded the Torah scroll, with the people rising when Ezra opens the scroll, followed by Ezra’s blessing and the people’s responses. The significant thing is that these acts of worship are triggered by the opening of the scroll.

Whether or not this narrative describes an actual event in Ezra’s work or (more likely) is a product of an author working from worship patterns familiar to him, its significance is the attitude towards the Torah that it registers. The books of Ezra-Nehemiah are dated by many scholars to the early to mid 4th century B.C.E. – i.e. 399-350, meaning by that date the Torah – in whatever form it existed then – had come to be reverred.

The degree of authority granted the Torah – or at least the parts of it known in Jerusalem – is evidenced by an incident narrated in Nehemiah 13 about what happened when one part of the Torah was read: “1On that day they read from the book of Moses in the hearing of the people; and in it was found written that no Ammonite or Moabite should ever enter the assembly of God, 2because they did not meet the Israelites with bread and water, but hired Balaam against them to curse them – yet our God turned the curse into a blessing. 3When the people heard the law, they separated from Israel all those of foreign descent.”

Identifying the passage consulted is easy; these words come from Deuteronomy 23.3-5b. What’s noteworthy, however, is how seriously these words were taken. In fact, the subsequent verses tell of Nehemiah expelling a non-Jew from his abode in the temple and then verbally abusing Jewish men he spied who had married foreign women. Even more strikingly, in Ezra 10, Ezra extracts a promise from men in a similar situation to expel their foreign wives and the children they had conceived with them.

While this attests the increasing prominence the Torah takes on in the Persian period – the topic on which we have been focusing – it also highlights another issue under formation in Judaism of the Persian period, that of self-identity. What does it mean to be Jewish? The answer given in Ezra-Nehemiah seems to be genetic: to be Jewish is to be born of Jewish parents – although this answer seems to embody more of a concern about religious purity – a fearfulness of the religious influences foreigners might bring – rather than ethnic bigotry, as such.

In any case, a debate over this issue seems to have raged during the Persian period. Our first hint of this comes from words spoken around 530 B.C.E. by the prophet of Isaiah 56-66, who worked among those who had returned to Judah. He finds it necessary to reassure two groups who feel their access to the anticipated rebuilt temple threatened: “1Do not let the foreigner joined to the L ORD say, The L ORD will surely separate me from his people”; and do not let the eunuch say, I am just a dry tree.” 4To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, 5I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that
shall not be cut off. 6 And the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD, and to be his servants, all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant – 7 these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.”

It is to foreigners fearful of being expelled that the prophet utters, in the LORD’s name, the reassurance that they will have access to the temple, underscoring that with the promise, “my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” Clearly in that early period the question of Jewish identity had already arisen. And the prophet’s response was essentially that anyone who adheres to worship of the LORD has shown themselves worthy of inclusion in the worshiping community.

The book of Jonah in its own way also attests the struggle with Jewish identity during the Persian period. Even though the book is set in the period of the Assyrians, several slips betray that it was composed under Persian rule. For instance, the response of the King of Nineveh to Jonah’s proclamation is narrated this way: “7 Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: “By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. 8 Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands.”

Two features of this report fit poorly in the Assyrian period. First, under Assyrian rule, decrees were issued in the name of the king alone. The promulgation of a decree in the name of “the king and his nobles” was, however, a characteristically Persian practice. Second, the practice of including animals in ritual fasting and wearing of sackcloth is not attested for the Assyrian period; it is, however, known to have been a Persian practice.

So the author tips his hand as to the period in which he wrote this story. But of greater interest is the issue with which he grapples in the story.

As you know, Jonah is more than reluctant to accept the divine commission to go to Nineveh to proclaim coming judgment; in fact, he sets sail in the opposite direction, only to encounter rough water and get himself thrown overboard by the ship’s crew. Through a bit of aquatic persuasion, the LORD manages to convince Jonah of his need to embrace the original commission. Jonah heads to Nineveh, less than wholeheartedly proclaims coming judgment, and witnesses what no other prophet in the Bible has seen: the people repent.

And yet, Jonah reacts to this like no other prophet would: he pouts because, in response to the people’s repentance, the LORD has determined to spare them. But just in case the LORD might have a change of mind, Jonah sits down on a hill overlooking the city to see what will happen.

The sun is beating down pretty intensely, so Jonah is happy when a plant suddenly sprouts to give him shade. But just as quickly the plant withers, and Jonah is incensed that he should be deprived of the plant. When Jonah is asked by the LORD whether he is justified in being so distraught about that plant, which he did nothing to produce, he responds, “By all means!”

It’s only at this juncture that we find the point of the story of Jonah, for the LORD follows up with the question, “And should I not be concerned about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also many animals?”

Quite strikingly, that is the last verse of the book. Jonah ends with a question, which the prophet (not to mention the reader) is left to consider. Whatever else is going on in the book of
Jonah, clearly it is meant to prompt reflection on Jewish attitudes towards people of other nationalities. To put it another way, Jonah is offered as an Archie Bunker type character to get people to think about relationships with non-Jews.

All three of these books, then, attest increased attention to the relationship between Jews and non-Jews. They come at the issue from various vantage points and provide different answers, but they all attest the growing importance of the question of Jewish identity.

A final and especially intriguing development in thinking during the Persian period was the introduction of dualism into the divine realm. Even though, as we saw last session, ancient Israel admitted the existence of deities besides the LORD, he alone was to be worshipped and was readily regarded as the source of all things, even evil. It’s not that there were no other causes of evil. Israelite writers were quite well aware of people who schemed to take what was not theirs and of nations who used heinous means to accomplish their objectives. But when accounting for the ultimate source of a given evil in the world, they did not shy away from tracing it back to the LORD himself.

You’ll recall the LORD’s willingness to take responsibility for the plight of deaf, mute, and lame people in speaking with Moses. Or, more strikingly, recall 2 Samuel’s account of what prompted David to order a census that ultimately brought divine wrath down on Israel as a punishment for that deed: “1 Again the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, “Go, count the people of Israel and Judah.” 2 So 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.”

That, however, is not the only version of that event. In fact, much of what we find in 2 Samuel through 2 Kings is narrated again in 1 & 2 Chronicles. Indeed, it appears that the author of Chronicles – who wrote during the Persian period and who is typically referred to simply as “the Chronicler” – had access to essentially the same books we know of as Samuel through Kings, and to a large degree used them as the foundation for telling his version of Israel’s history.

However, the Chronicler did not simply take the account we know from 1 Samuel through 2 Kings and reprint it. He made modifications and even deletions and additions in order that the narrative might bear the themes and ideas he thought important to highlight.

E.g. the temple plays a much more prominent role in Chronicles than in 1 & 2 Kings, and King David becomes the chief patron of the temple. Thus, while David is forbidden to build the temple, as in 2 Samuel, the Chronicler has him oversee the cutting of all the stones and preparation of all the wood and other materials, so that his son, Solomon, would be able to assemble the temple as a virtual prefab kit. Moreover, the Chronicler assigns to David the task of orchestrating temple worship by organizing the priests, the temple musicians and other temple staff. Those are roles never attributed to David in 2 Samuel.

Another way the Chronicler modifies the narrative is by making certain that the scales of justice always balance. When King Josiah dies at an early age, the Chronicler divulges a sin that accounts for Josiah’s early death as a punishment. Conversely, when wicked King Manasseh lives a long life, the Chronicler has him repenting half way through his life and living faithfully thereafter, thus justifying his long life.

So it shouldn’t be surprising, then, to find that the Chronicler modifies this story of David conducting a census: “1 Satan stood up against Israel, and incited David to count the people of
Israel. 2 So David said to Joab and the commanders of the army, “Go, number Israel, from Beer-sheba to Dan, and bring me a report, so that I may know their number.”

The obvious difference is that no longer is it the LORD who, in anger, incites David to carry out a crime for which the LORD will later impose punishment. The character who incites David is, rather, Satan. Notice that in addition to transferring responsibility for inciting David’s sin, the Chronicler also changes the motivation for doing so. In 2 Samuel it is the LORD’s wrath against Israel – for some unspecified crime – that led to his inciting the census. In 1 Chronicles, on the other hand, Satan is not someone provoked to wrath by Israel’s behavior, but is portrayed as Israel’s opponent: he stood up against Israel.

The result is that there are two forces from the divine realm at work. Satan incites David to do something so evil that the LORD must bring punishment for the deed. In fact, the upshot of this is that Satan prompts David to do something that Satan knows will result in harm to Israel because of God’s inevitable response.

In the mind of the Chronicler – who elsewhere carefully balances good and evil in human affairs – the inciting of David to an evil that must be punished could not be attributed to the LORD. There had to be a division of the divine world into good forces and evil ones.

This is not, of course, the only time we run into this figure called Satan in the Hebrew Bible. Best known are the first two chapters of the book of Job, where a figure by this name questions whether Job is really as upstanding a fellow as the LORD claims that he is. We need to consider a couple of things about the appearance of that figure in Job 1 & 2.

The figure called “Satan” appears for the first time early in the book, just after the narrator summarizes Job’s exemplary character: “6 One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the LORD, and Satan also came among them. 7 The LORD said to Satan, “Where have you come from?” Satan answered the LORD, “From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it.” 8 The LORD said to Satan, “Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil.” 9 Then Satan answered the LORD, “Does Job fear God for nothing? 10 Have you not put a fence around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. 11 But stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face.”

Three observations. First, “Satan” here is not a proper noun, even though it appears that way in translation. The Hebrew word translated “Satan” is accompanied by the definite article: “the Satan” – something quite uncharacteristic of proper nouns (names), but common with titles. I.e. rather than “Satan” being a name here, it is more likely a title for this figure.

In fact, the Hebrew word “satan” is used to describe the behavior of individuals. A prime example is Numbers 22.22, which reports what happened when the non-Israelite visionary, Balaam, attempted to travel by donkey to a site from which he could curse Israel: “God’s anger was kindled because he was going, and the angel of the LORD took his stand in the road as his adversary.” As you likely anticipated, the word translated “adversary” in this verse is identical to the one translated “the Satan” in Job 1. And, in fact, the role of the Satan in Job fits the role of an adversary well – not in the sense that the Satan is personally opposed to Job, but because he functions in a sort of legal adversarial relationship to Job.

It’s important to notice that the Satan is not the one to raise the question of Job’s character. God does that. After the Satan has given account of his whereabouts – he has been walking throughout the world – the LORD raises the question: “Have you considered my servant Job?
There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil.”

God is the one who puts the spotlight on Job; the Satan simply responds with a question about whether this assessment of Job’s character probes deeply enough: “Does Job fear God for nothing? Have you not put a fence around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land.”

And even when the Satan raises the possibility of testing Job’s piety, he proposes that God do the dirty work: “But stretch out your hand now, and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face.” God, in turn, hands the job (and Job) over to the Satan. The same thing happens in the second meeting, in chapter 2.

So the character of the Satan in the book of Job is quite different than the Satan figure who incites David to evil in 1 Chronicles 21. He is not a malicious character, but someone intent on testing whether Job is as upright as God claims he is.

Intriguingly, though, this figure of the Satan in the book of Job is a member of the divine realm. We are told he shows up on the day that “the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the LORD.” “Heavenly beings” translates a Hebrew phrase that means, literally, “the sons of God,” and reflects the same sort of scene we saw depicted last session in Psalm 82: “God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment….I say, “You are gods, children of the Most High, all of you…”

The Satan figure of Job 1 & 2 is simply one of the members of the divine council present on a particular day. By the time we come to 1 Chronicles 21, however, this member of the divine council has become a malicious adversary to God and Israel, a sinister figure bearing the name “Satan” – i.e. the definite article is not used; Satan is a proper noun.

The question is, what led to the transformation of the Satan figure into the independent proponent of evil we find in 1 Chronicles 21? To put the question a little differently, what led to the creation of this type of dualistic thinking in early Judaism?

One answer commonly given is that this is a result of contact with Persian culture. By the end of the 6th century, Persia’s religion was Zoroastrianism, founded by Zoroaster or (more properly) Zarathustra, whose life is dated as early as 1200 down to the 6th century itself.

There are problems in ascertaining the structure of Zoroastrian thought in the early Persian period, since the sacred texts of Zoroastrianism underwent many alterations, subtractions and additions over a long span of time. Most scholars are convinced, however, that the Gathas, the earliest sections of the Avestas, contains material written by Zarathustra himself, and thus gives us a fairly good read on the early stages of the religion.

One characteristic of Zoroastrianism, already in its earliest phases, was a strong dualism between good and evil, even on the divine plane. The chief god, Ahuramazda, was opposed by a proponent of evil, although that proponent, Agra Mainyu, was not considered an equal to Ahuramazda. In any case, the sort of dualism of good and evil found in nascent Zoroastrianism might have influenced development of a similar dualism in Jewish thought.

There are problems trying to prove this, however. There are no indications that Judaism consciously borrowed from Zoroastrianism. In fact, even though literature written during the Persian period shows understandable interest in Persian rulers, never does it take any explicit interest in their religion. Moreover, even though the Hebrew of the period borrows several words from Persian, such as pardes, “park,” none of the words borrowed are from the realm of Persian religion. If the dualism we find in 1 Chronicles 21 was effected at all by Zoroastrian
thought, that influence was likely only indirect, and may have played on tendencies already existent in Jewish thinking of the era.

In any case, a dualism that separates good and evil within the divine realm is a feature that develops in religion only during the Persian period.

It is this constellation of new development in religious thought – monotheism, focus on the Torah, delineation of Jewish identity, and dualism – that (in my view) sustains the conclusion that the earliest phase of Judaism – its period of origins – lies in the Persian era.

Next time we’ll turn to the culture of Greece, to see how it develops and grows, in anticipation of the interaction with Judaism we’ll find reflected in the Jewish Hellenistic Literature we’ll study this term.