

**Reading Early Prophetic Claims of Biblical Monotheism  
in the Context of Africa: an Essay in Honor of Rev.  
Prof. Justin S. Ukpong**

Rev. Dr. Michael Ufok Udoekpo

---

**Abstract:**

Religion today is an exciting phenomenon for Africans, just as it was for the ancient Israelites. This is especially true for those Africans who recognize the Bible as the word of God. They, like the ancient Israelites, see Yhwh, their supreme God, as the origin, sustenance, and sovereign of creation, who encompasses different attributes and has various functions in human affairs. The biblical conception of God has a lengthy history of gradual differentiation, with the final conception of Israel's God emerging during the time of Second Isaiah (Isa 44–55). Prior to this period, Baal, El, Asharah, and other deities were monolatrously recognized side by side with Israel's God.

Many scholars, both African and non-African in origin, have studied the history of the gradual emergence of biblical monotheism. This essay builds on these past studies. It historically and contextually examines the theological claims of the early/pre-exilic prophets (Elijah, Elisha, Amos, and Hosea), viewing these prophets' writings as the cradle of biblical monotheism. It argues comparatively that the ironies the Israelite prophets addressed in their writings have repeated themselves in the African shrines and worship centers (Christianity, Islam, and ATR) of today, where the true notion of God—one characterized by kindness, mercy, oneness, universalism, fertility, justice, life, and compassion—has been replaced by tension, division,

narrow provincialism, kidnappings, abuse of persons, lack of patriotism, violence, syncretistic behavior, fundamentalism, and religious extremism. To these situations, we find consolation and relevance in the charisms and teachings of the prophets Elijah, Elisha, Amos, and Hosea, who promoted exclusive worship of Yhwh.

### **Introduction:**

The subject of the emergence and significance of biblical monotheism—the worship of Yhwh alone—is central to Old Testament studies and Israelite religion.<sup>471</sup> It is also at the heart of the African view of the concept of God (the Supreme Being). Both ancient Israelite culture and African culture conceive of the Supreme Being, God, as the source of life, oneness, fertility, mercy, justice, and peace. Over the years, much research has been conducted on this important biblical theme. Some of these research projects are listed in Robert Karl Gnuse’s “Emergence of Biblical Monotheism,” Mark S. Smith’s *Early History of God*, and John S. Mbiti’s *Concept of God*.<sup>472</sup> Strictly speaking, what we call “biblical monotheism” evolved over a long period and underwent revolutionary processes. The concept of God moved through various stages of monolatrous and henotheistic intensity, or convergence and differentiation, in the pre-exilic era. A pure monotheism arose in the exilic era and reached its pinnacle in the time of Deutero-Isaiah.<sup>473</sup>

---

<sup>471</sup>. For overviews of the basic meaning, role, function, significance, freedom, types, manner, and faithful messages of Israel’s prophets, see Rowley 95-113; Heschel 3-31; Bruce 186-197; Bruggemann.

<sup>472</sup>. Past scholarship on this subject is extensively listed in Smith, *The Early History of God* xii-xxxvi; Gnuse, *No Other Gods* 62-128; “The Emergence of Monotheism” 315-336; Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa*.

<sup>473</sup>. Gnuse categorizes scholars like Niels Peter Lemche, Thomas Thompson, Giovanni Garbini, Lowell Handy, Hebert Niehr, and Philip Davies as “minimalists” who have envisioned a scenario that moves radically beyond the Heilsgeschichte models of the Biblical Theology Movement, and even the emerging consensus of many other scholars (“Emergence of Monotheism” 325-328). Their audience is mostly European circles, particularly some

Nili Fox's 2006 work, "Concepts of God in Israel and the Question of Monotheism," confirms this.<sup>474</sup> In her work, Fox approaches the question of biblical monotheism from an anthropological perspective. She argues that monotheistic and polytheistic notions of God can coexist in any given society. Adapting works on African religions, Fox explores the concept of what she calls "diffused monotheism," whereby a supreme deity delegates authority to subordinate functionaries. She concludes, in agreement with many scholars, that ancient Israel had diverse religious expressions that coexisted with the worship of El, Baal, Asherah, and other deities.<sup>475</sup> Fox describes this phenomenon as "monolatry" or "henotheism." That is, the oneness of the godhead is viewed only in reference to worship because, ontologically, a plurality of gods is acknowledged. The exclusive worship of a god within a social location is enforced by the prohibition of allegiance to other deities.<sup>476</sup> She adds that henotheism is sometimes distinguished from monolatry in that allegiance to a specific deity is temporary rather than long-lasting. Therefore, only at a certain place and in a certain time is devotion offered exclusively to a single deity.<sup>477</sup> This was the case in ancient Israel, even though there was a small "minority of pre-exilic prophets"<sup>478</sup> who faithfully insisted on developing the framework for

---

Scandinavians who have dated biblical texts to the exilic and post-exilic periods (Halpern, "Brisker Pipes" 77-115).

<sup>474</sup>. Fox, "Concept of God in Israel" 327-345.

<sup>475</sup>. Some of these expressions, which include sacrifice, necromancy, divinization, prayers, and vows, are well articulated in Dever 91-175; Halpern 327-345.

<sup>476</sup>. Fox, "Concept of God in Israel" 326.

<sup>477</sup>. Fox, "Concept of God in Israel" 326.

<sup>478</sup>. One of the earliest users of the expression "prophetic minority" is Bernhard Lang. In his work *Monotheism and the Prophetic Minority*, Lang explains Yhwh-alonists as a group that demands and promotes the exclusive worship of Israel's God, Yhwh (11-19). For him, various scholars, including historians and anthropologists Abraham Kuenen, Max Weber, and Nikiprowetzky, are among those who placed the nomadic religion of the patriarchs, of Moses, the tribal league, or the prophets at the first stage of the developing belief in one God. He views prophetic nationalism is the cradle of monotheism.

the pure monotheistic claims that came to maturity in Deutero-Isaiah's new hermeneutic of election and oneness.<sup>479</sup>

Eung Chun Park, in his interesting work *Either Jew or Gentile*, observes regarding this new hermeneutic in Deutero-Isaiah that Israelites were chosen not so that they alone would be saved, but in order that, by their worship of one God, they could become God's instrument through which all the nations could be directed to God. This hermeneutic is expressed in the famous metaphor of Israel as a "light to the nations (Isa 42:6; 49:6), which became the central symbol of universalism both in later Judaism and Christianity."<sup>480</sup>

The primary focus of this essay is not on Deutero-Isaiah, but on historically and contextually examining the theological contributions and foundations of Yhwh-alone worship presented by the minority prophets (Elijah-Elisha, Hosea, and Amos), whose works were given new interpretation by Deutero-Isaiah. Using our honoree Justin Ukpong's approach of "inculturation hermeneutics," this study also highlights the value of these works for Africa.<sup>481</sup> Additionally, this essay compares these prophets' claims of early monotheism (the belief in the existence of one God, Yhwh, and exclusive worship of Yhwh) with traditional African concepts of God as the source of oneness and universalism, healing and hope, fertility and mercy, justice and righteousness, kindness, faithfulness, and patriotism. These are challenging qualities. And in light of this study, they are needed today throughout contemporary African societies, which are plagued by an outdated sense of division, narrow provincialism, violence, syncretistic behavior, fundamentalism, and a negative pluralism of religions.<sup>482</sup>

---

<sup>479</sup>. Fox, "Monotheism" 327-345.

<sup>480</sup>. Park, *Either Jew Or Gentile* 13.

<sup>481</sup>. See Ukpong, "Inculturation Hermeneutics" 17-32; Schreiter, *The New Catholicity* 1-27.

<sup>482</sup>. Polytheism refers to the recognition and worship of multiple gods, each independent and co-eternal or as a pantheon. For further explication of

### **The Cradle of Monotheism: From Judges to the Monarchy**

Prior to the time of Elijah and Elisha in 1–2 Kings—that is, the time following the death of Joshua (Josh 24) as described in the book of Judges (Judg 1–21:25)—Israel existed as a loose confederation of tribes without a central authority. Israel existed in this manner until the rise of the king in 1 Samuel 8–12. Although there was a common religious faith in Yhwh during this time, Israel’s citizens, judges, and religious leaders, the Levites, repeatedly lapsed into the worship of the gods recognized by their Canaanite neighbors (Judg 2:16; 17:16; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). This cycle of disobedience, unfaithfulness, and the plurality of worship is alluded to in Judges 2:10–19:

Moreover, that whole generation was gathered to their ancestors, and another generation grew up after them, who did not know the Lord or the work that he had done for Israel. . . . and they abandoned the Lord, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt; they followed other gods, from among the gods of the peoples who were all around them, and bowed down to them; and they provoked the Lord to anger. They abandoned the Lord, and worshiped Baal and the Astartes. So the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he gave them over to plunderers who plundered them, and he sold them into the power of their enemies all around, so that they could no longer withstand their enemies. . . . Then the Lord raised up judges, who delivered them . . . Yet they did not listen even to their judges . . . But whenever the judge died, they would relapse and behave worse than their ancestors, following other gods, worshiping them and bowing down to them. (NRSV)

Judges 2:10–19 demonstrates that early Israelite culture was not completely separate from that of the Israelites’ Canaanite neighbors. Smith makes a similar observation and argues that Yhwh emerged as the sole deity only to be converged later with El. Smith further argues

---

monotheism (practical, functional, ethical, and pure) see McKenzie 584-585; Jensen 674-676.

that Yhwh adopted the features of Asherah and Baal. At the same time, certain anti-Yhwh practices were eliminated as part of a process of differentiation, including observance of the cult of the dead, child sacrifice, and worship at high places.<sup>483</sup>

As also noted in Lang's work, during the time of the monarchy's inception (1–2 Sam), the dominant Israelite religion was still polytheistic and undifferentiated from that of the Canaanites (e.g., the Ammonites, Moabites, and Edomites).<sup>484</sup> Every generation, including today's generation of Africans, encounters threats to their sense of oneness, nationalism, faithfulness, peace, and togetherness. For the pre-monarchical and monarchical generations of Israelites, the worship of Canaanite deities such as Baal and others challenged the kings and citizens' obedience and faithfulness to Yhwh.<sup>485</sup> The worship of foreign gods provided the greatest and most enduring threat to the development and promotion of monotheism, or exclusive worship of Yhwh, in ancient Israel. Nevertheless, the prophets Elijah, Elisha, Amos, and Hosea continued to champion worship of Yhwh alone.

### **Prophet Elijah: Cradle of Biblical Monotheism**

In his work 1–2 Samuel, 1–2 Kings with an Excursus on Davidic Dynasty and Holy City Zion, Charles Conroy argues that Elijah lived during one of the great crises of Yahwism in the northern kingdom of Israel.<sup>486</sup> The ninth century BC, when Elijah lived, marked a critical moment of the cult of Baal in Israel. The prophet Elijah was called to challenge the idolatry and tyrannical culture of his time (1 Kgs 19–21). Embracing this challenge, Elijah preached of God as a source of fertility and stressed exclusive worship of God, since he alone is the source of life and is father to the poor. This is apparent in his

---

<sup>483</sup>. Smith, *The Origin of Biblical Monotheism* 151; *Early History of God* 19-64.

<sup>484</sup>. Lang, *Monotheism and the Prophetic Minority* 20.

<sup>485</sup>. See the threats of Baal as discussed Day, "Baal," 545-549.

<sup>486</sup>. Conroy, *1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings* 176.

announcement of drought to King Ahab in 1 Kings 17:1–24. The passage opens with Elijah informing Ahab that there would be no rain unless God said otherwise (v. 1), for Yhwh alone could provide rain. The text then records Yhwh’s ability to command the ravens to feed Elijah bread and meat in the morning and evening, and to provide Elijah with water from the wadi (vv. 2–6).

The two miracle narratives recorded in 1 Kings 17:8–24 demonstrate that God during the time of Elijah was perceived as the universal healer. Both miracles took place in the Sidonian town of Zerephat. The narratives begin in verses 8–9 with the introduction: “Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying” (wāyāhî dābar yāhwāh lē’mōr). This same phrasing was used at the beginning of verse 2. In both cases, the formula introduces a report of prophetic revelation—private communication from God to his prophet. In verse 9, the same God commands Elijah to go to Zarephath (gûm lēkha tsāraphtāh).<sup>487</sup>

The miracle stories in 1 Kings 17:10–16 and 17:17–24, as narrated by the Deuteronomistic historian, show that Yhwh alone is efficacious through the instrument of his prophet Elijah. In these stories, Elijah travels beyond the borders of Israel to the native Sidonian land of Queen Jezebel, daughter of King Ethabaal (1 Kgs 16:31). These stories thus contain a universal call to worship only Yhwh, who alone provides for everyone and heals everyone in every land—including Africa. Through Elijah, God brings freedom and joy to the poor of Zarephath. Elijah’s obedience to Yhwh’s call in these stories thus challenges people of all cultures—particularly practitioners of monotheistic religions in the divided continent of Africa—to be the conduit of Yhwh’s life-giving benefits, even when it is not politically and socially convenient, as was the case for Elijah.

In 1 Kings 18, Yhwh’s agent Elijah participates in a dramatic contest in which he defeats and kills 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets

---

<sup>487</sup>. Long, *1 Kings* 183.

of Asherah on Mount Carmel (vv. 1–46).<sup>488</sup> The opening statement, “After many days the word of the Lord came to Elijah, in the third year of the drought” (v. 1), suggests continuity with 1 Kings 17:2–16. First Kings 18:1 also builds on the motif of rain (mātār) in 17:1 and moves forward the larger drama of the omnipotent God.<sup>489</sup> Without fearing persecution (1 Kgs 18:9–19), Elijah declares to the Israelites the danger of “limping with two different opinions” (v. 21)—that is, worshiping many gods instead of the one true God of Israel. Elijah then delivers the terms of contest (vv. 23–24), challenges and mocks the false gods (v. 27), and defeats all the prophets of Baal (v. 40). He then announces the end of the drought (vv. 41–46). This miracle account communicates that the worship of the true God of Israel—the healing God and the provider of rain, dew, and life—is (and should be) the result of an uncompromising decision by people of all cultures. Half-measures, hypocrisy, and the self-seeking accommodation of idols cannot be tolerated.<sup>490</sup>

Elijah’s work in promoting and laying the groundwork for biblical monotheism came with the price of persecution. Every prophet in every land, culture, and time, whether ancient or modern—including prophets in Africa today—must be willing to pay such a price. Elijah’s very life was threatened by the status quo. In 1 Kings 19,

---

<sup>488</sup>. Barnes rightly remarks that the word “Asherah,” which commonly denotes the symbol of a goddess (14:23), denotes here, as in 15:13, the goddess herself. As to this last fact, there was for a considerable time doubt on the correctness of the text (*The First of Book of Kings* 149). But recent excavation has shown that Ashirat (=Asherah) was worshiped in very early times in Palestine. Assyrians and Babylonians identified Ashirat with Ishtar, who was in one aspect the mother-goddess, who helps women in travail. It is probable that Asherah was regarded as the consort of the Baal. This probability is strengthened by recent scholarship and archeological research. Recently, Smith stresses that in recent years scholars have claimed that Asherah was an Israelite goddess and the consort of Yahweh because her name, or at least the cultic item symbolizing her, the Asherah, appears in the eighth century inscriptions from Kuntillet ‘Ajrūd and Khirbet el- Qôm (*Early History of God* 48). He adds that, during the period of the judges, just as El and Baal and their images were adapted to the cult of Yahweh, the Asherah was a symbol in Yahwehistic cult in this period.

<sup>489</sup>. Long, *1 Kings* 190.

<sup>490</sup>. Conroy, *1-2 Samuel, 1-2 Kings* 184.



Elijah flees from Jezebel's persecution, traveling to the wilderness toward the south of Beer-sheba. Fatigued after a day's dusty journey into the wilderness, Elijah is frustrated and wishes for death (1 Kgs 19:1–4). But God's grace is sufficient for God's prophet (vv. 5–8). God provides for Elijah, as he had provided for the Israelites in the desert (Exod 16). After traveling for forty days and forty nights in the wilderness, Elijah finally arrives at Mount Horeb (Sinai), the sacred mountain of the covenant, where Moses once received the Ten Commandments (Exod 19–24; 32–34). On this mountain, Elijah encounters Israel's God—not in thunder, violent wind, fire, or earthquakes, but in a gentle sound of divine silence (1 Kgs 19:11–13). Such gentle encounters of God are needed in our noisy and violent contemporary society. In all this, Elijah remains God's mouthpiece, serving as both a kingmaker and a king breaker.<sup>491</sup> God instructs Elijah to anoint Hazael as king over Aram (v. 15), Jehu as king in Israel (in place of Ahab), and Elisha as his prophetic successor (vv. 15–21).<sup>492</sup>

Additional theological significance emerges in Elijah's prophetic stories, which lay a foundation for biblical monotheism. This is particularly true of Elijah's journey to Sinai, where Moses had received revelation from God after the exodus. First, in this passage we see that prophets—even modern prophets, such as those in Africa today—must interpret and build upon Israel's faith-covenant tradition of the worship of one God. Second, we see that prophets are reformers who cherish the importance of the Sinai event, which looks back to the earlier promises God made to Abraham and points forward to the new covenant traditions. Third, we see that prophets like Elijah must keep the Mosaic tradition alive in new contextual forms and with a renewed spirit, especially in a world (the African

---

<sup>491</sup>. Leclerc, *Introduction to the Prophets* 90.

<sup>492</sup>. Branick, *Understanding the Historical Books* 100.

continent in particular) where the poor and the needy are neglected.<sup>493</sup>

Richard Sklba summarizes the significance of Elijah's early prophetic claims of monotheism for us today in the following words:

Among the most influential of the spirited prophets of Israel towers the figure of Elijah the Tisbite from the land of Gilead just east of the Jordan River (1 K17:1). He is presented as an individual woven into the theological legends and reminiscences of the Deuteronomistic history (1 K17–2K 2). ... In the age of syncretistic distractions and dangerous flirtation with the religious foundations of the political power in neighboring nations, Elijah stood tall and strong, firmly recalling the people of Israel to the life-giving core of their ancestral faith.<sup>494</sup>

### **The Prophet Elisha as a Cradle of Biblical Monotheism**

Elisha succeeded his predecessor Elijah in his early prophetic claims of biblical monotheism (2 Kgs 2–9; 13:14–21). He effectively “picked up the mantle of Elijah that had fallen from him” (2 Kgs 2:13). First Kings 19:19–21 records that “Elijah passed by him [Elisha] and threw his mantle over him.” In both accounts, Elijah transfers his prophetic authority and his monotheistic claims to Elisha with implicit divine blessing. From then on, Elisha, like Elijah and Moses, served as an agent of the mighty deeds of Israel's God. For instance:

---

<sup>493</sup>. Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament* 277.

<sup>494</sup>. Sklba, *Pre-Exilic Prophecy* 28.

- He parted the Jordan River (2 Kgs 2:8, 13–14)
- He provided for the needy widow (1 Kgs 17:14–16; 2 Kgs 4:1–7)
- He raised the widow’s son from the dead (1 Kgs 17:17–24; 2 Kgs 4:32–37)
- He miraculously fed the hungry and had leftovers (2 Kgs 4:42–44)
- He brought God’s healing mercy to the ailing Naaman (2 Kgs 5:1–19)
- He effectively prophesied in God’s name (2 Kgs 2:21)

In his prophetic role, Elisha proves to be an inspiring agent of biblical monotheism, promoting exclusive worship of Yhwh, who alone heals and protects immigrants, widows, and the poor—a theme that is familiar to most of our African brothers and sisters. Many of Israel’s classical prophets, especially Amos and Hosea, were also effective in laying the groundwork for biblical monotheism. Their prophetic careers are relevant for the situation in Africa, as stressed in the following paragraphs.

### **The Prophet Amos as a Cradle of Biblical Monotheism**

As noted in Bernhard Lang’s *Monotheism and the Prophetic Minority*, the prophet Amos stands among the minority prophets who promoted exclusive worship of Israel’s God.<sup>495</sup> Amos grew up as a businessman-farmer in the humble village of Tekoa, located in southern Jerusalem (Amos 1:1; 7:14–17). In the mid-eighth century, he was called from Tekoa to prophesy to many nations. During this time, Jeroboam II governed in the northern kingdom (786–746 BC), and Uzziah ruled in the southern kingdom (783–742 BC). It was a time of relative peace when Israel and Judah reached the height of physical expansion and wealth. Yet this prosperity was corruptly restricted to an elite minority class of hypocritical worshipers, while the majority poor were neglected and abused—a pattern familiar in

---

<sup>495</sup>. See my primary remarks.

many African nations today. Amos attacked this society's crimes (Amos 1–9). He directed most of his oracles against the false cult at Bethel.

Many commentators have argued that Amos is not as great a promoter of the exclusive worship of Yhwh as was Hosea, and they thereby concentrate on Amos's theme of social justice. However, I insist, as I have done in my recent work *Rethinking the Prophetic Critique of Worship in Amos 5 for Contemporary Nigeria and the USA* (2017), that Amos has a seat at the table of early promoters of biblical monotheism. In my 2017 publication, I argue that one significant theme for the prophet Amos is that worship of God should not be a matter of hypocritical pilgrimages, empty offerings, ceremonial songs, sacrifices, and shallow rituals—especially when performed by the societal elite while neglecting the poor and exploiting their lowliness. I also highlight Amos's belief that authentic worship of God alone must be expressed outside of the temple through obedience to God, love of neighbor, the promotion of social justice, acts of kindness and mercy, and righteous acts in daily life.<sup>496</sup> Amos courageously and consistently charges Israel for wrongly preferring external sanctuaries and their associated rituals over the one God of Israel they intended to worship and honor (Amos 3:13–15; 4:4–5; 5:4–5). He recognizes that worship in Israel is becoming an end in itself instead of a means to worshipping God alone and reaching out to one's neighbors. It lacks justice and righteousness and raises the risk for God's judgment (Amos 5:18–20).<sup>497</sup>

### **Hosea and Exclusive Worship of Israel's God**

As also noted by Bernhard Lang, the “Yahweh-alone movement” (or prophecy promoting exclusive worship of Yhwh) is prevalent in the preaching of Hosea. A contemporary of Amos, Hosea also began his

---

<sup>496</sup>. Udoekpo, *Rethinking the Prophetic Critique* xxi.

<sup>497</sup>. Udoekpo, *Rethinking the Prophetic Critique* xxi, 144.

prophetic career in the mid-eighth century BC.<sup>498</sup> He is known as a prophet of the covenant who is skilled with the use of metaphors.<sup>499</sup> He uses a metaphor to tell the story of the relationship between Israel and her one true God, who consistently loves his people. He alone provides (Hos 2). Despite Israel's unfaithfulness, God is always faithful and will never walk away from his covenant promises. Hosea's marriage to Gomer represents God's covenant with the nation of Israel, which the people have violated by practicing idolatry (Hos 1:1–3).<sup>500</sup> Many prophetic themes resound throughout Hosea's teachings, including an emphasis on justice and worship (Hos 4–8), judgment (Hos 9–11), divine compassion, and fertility and infertility (Hos 11–14). Yet most remarkable is his emphasis on Israel's faithfulness to her loving God alone. This is the very heart of biblical monotheism.

Stressing this faithfulness, Hosea records God's words: "When Israel was a child, I loved him ... I took them up in my arms ... I led them with cords of kindness, with the bands of love, and I became to them as one who eases the yoke on their jaws, and I bent down to them and fed them" (Hos 11:1–4 ESV). Hosea illustrates this prophecy through his three children, who are given symbolic names. The name of the first child, Jezreel, recalls Jehu's bloody extermination of the entire family of Omri in Jezreel and the purge of Baalism (2 Kgs 9–10); the name of the second child, Lo-ruhama, means "not pitied"; the name of the third child, Lo-ammi, means "not my people." Hosea also communicates his message through words of love, sadness, judgment, and hope. He does not spare kings and priests. He singles out the "calf of Samaria" (Hos 8:6; 13:2) and the political class, who "build palaces" (Hos 8:14) and promote "multiple altars" (Hos 8:11).

---

<sup>498</sup>. Lang, *Monotheism and Prophetic Minority* 30.

<sup>499</sup>. Collins, "Daniel and the Minor Prophets" 355; Kelle, *Hosea 2* 34-109; Steinstra, *YHWH is the Husband of His People* 96-103.

<sup>500</sup>. Matthew, *101 Questions and Answers* 52-53.

## Claims of Early Israel's Prophets and Their Relation to the African Concept of God

The preceding paragraphs have offered a theological-historical overview of the emergence of monotheism and the claims of the early/classical prophets (Elijah, Elisha, Amos, and Hosea) who lay the foundation for the exclusive worship of Israel's God despite the challenges of their times. The following paragraphs will explore the African notion of the supreme God and relate this to the challenges of the early/classical prophets' mission and times. John S. Mbiti's research on African religions, cult practices, and ideas about God and deities, gained from examining about 300 African peoples who follow traditional native religions, serves as a representative reference point here.<sup>501</sup> Mbiti's work is familiar to many scholars, both in Africa and beyond.

Like the ancient Israelites to whom Elijah, Elisha, Amos, and Hosea preached, most Africans (even before the advent of Christianity and many Africans' embracing of Christ's saving events) conceive of God as the origin and sustenance of all things: rain, food, dew, security, justice, judgment, and life. To them, God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. While scholars, including E. B. Idowu, debate whether African religion is homogeneous, every ethnic group seems to hold the notion of God as the Supreme Being.<sup>502</sup> Idowu argues that five elements bind together the African worldview, including: "belief in God, belief in divinities, belief in Spirits, belief in the ancestors, and the practice of magic and medicine, each with its own consequent, attendant cult."<sup>503</sup> However, similar to the ancient monolatrous Israel, God bears different names among various African

---

<sup>501</sup>. Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy and Concept of God in Africa*. His findings in these texts are based on data derived from a combination of published fieldwork and oral testimony. Although some of the data are said to be fragmentary, and the reliability of certain sources is questionable, the bulk of the information is believed to be accurate and to reflect native African thought.

<sup>502</sup>. Mbiti, *African Religions* 29-38; *Lineamenta* 63-65.

<sup>503</sup>. Idowu, *African Traditional Religion* 139.

groups. These names are mostly expressed in epithets such “Creator,” “Almighty,” “Maker of All Things,” and “Giver of Light.”<sup>504</sup>

The Ashanti of Ghana consider the earth to be second to God in power, as it is the first of his creations. They personify the earth as the fertile, great-breasted goddess Asase Yaa. Ashanti religion also features a pantheon of major and minor divinities through whom God manifests himself.<sup>505</sup> The religion of the Yoruba of Nigeria shows similar concepts, and their God, the “Sky God” or “Supreme God,” is ruler of the whole. <sup>506</sup> Other divinities are God’s agents, carrying out the functions of the Supreme Being on earth.<sup>507</sup> Also similar to ancient Israel, in the religious systems of African peoples, prayer is often directed to various divinities, and divinities and spirits other than God are venerated.<sup>508</sup> A common belief is that the divinities and spirits are intermediaries between humans and God.<sup>509</sup> While lesser divinities and spirits are commonly identified with natural phenomena, God is not. Additionally, similar to ancient Israelite prophetic literature, in many African religious systems God’s moral attributes are expressed as pity, mercy, kindness, justice, and righteousness.<sup>510</sup>

In her studies of biblical monotheism (listed in the primary section of this essay), Nili Fox appropriately concludes that, like traditional African culture, the ancient Israelites had diverse religious expressions. Ancient Israel was a monolatrous society that acknowledged the oneness of the supreme God only in reference to worship but ontologically recognized a plurality of gods and shrines. In Israel, worship of the supreme God coexisted with the worship of

---

<sup>504</sup>. Mbiti, *Concepts of God* 45.

<sup>505</sup>. Mbiti, *Concepts of God* 144-145.

<sup>506</sup>. Idowu, *Olódùmarè* 21–58.

<sup>507</sup>. Idowu, *Olódùmarè* 203.

<sup>508</sup>. Dever 91-195 articulately discusses this folk religion of the ancient Israelites.

<sup>509</sup>. Idowu, *African Traditional Religion* 169-175.

<sup>510</sup>. Mbiti, *Concepts of God* 31-42.

El, Baal, Asharah, and other deities; minority prophets including Elijah, Elisha, Amos, and Hosea challenged this worship of other gods and their accompanying shrines. They also laid the foundation not only for the necessary prophetic witnesses in modern Africa and beyond, but for what would become a full-blown biblical monotheism with a new hermeneutic of oneness, wholeness, and universalism during the time of Deutero-Isaiah.

In his praise of Deutero-Isaiah's new hermeneutical skills, Anderson writes:

But the exile also awakened a new world-consciousness. Israel's faith was enlarged by the vision of new horizons that had never been seen so clearly before, not even in the cosmopolitan age of Solomon. Israel realized that they must look beyond their own circumscribed community to the whole civilized world if they would behold the glory and majesty of Yahweh's purpose in history.<sup>511</sup>

Also speaking of "the major expansion of Israel's faith" by Deutero-Isaiah and Ezekiel during the exile, Henry Jackson and his colleagues observe that "the old narrow provincialism that had been expressed in reverence for the Jerusalem sanctuary [has given way] to a broader and more sublime interpretation of Yahweh's concern for all people."<sup>512</sup>

African religions witness a similar phenomenon, which has an exciting impact on both the rich and the poor. Community life is cherished, but more work needs to be done pragmatically. The supreme God is also acknowledged, but there remains the tendency for some not only to ontologically acknowledge other gods but to continue to worship and consult them in times of trouble and

---

<sup>511</sup>. Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament* 468.

<sup>512</sup>. Jackson et al., *People of the Covenant* 428.



uncertainty. Vincent G. Nyoyoko alludes to such ontological acknowledgment of other gods in his work “Dialogue and Inculturation.”<sup>513</sup> Nyoyoko laments the aftermath of the collapse of structures of African Traditional Religion, which has caused an influx of traditional religion worshipers to convert to Islam and Christianity. For him, these “hastily procured conversions do not go deep enough ... such that although organized traditional religion is crumbling many African traditional religious beliefs survive for the most part in the hearts and minds of many African Christians.”<sup>514</sup>

Nyoyoko’s lament reflects my observation in *Worship in Amos 5* that, today, Nigeria in particular is witnessing a proliferation of churches, as well as a pluralism of Traditional Religion (ATR). Worship centers and shrines are spread throughout this vast country, as was true in Israel during the time of Elijah, Elisha, Amos, and Hosea. The ironies of those times have also repeated themselves in African shrines and worship centers. In these places, the true notion of the God they worship, characterized by kindness, mercy, oneness, forgiveness, and compassion, is often replaced by tension, abuse of persons, kidnappings, narrow provincialism, violence, and loss.<sup>515</sup> Those who perpetrate this violence justify their unethical and non-prophetic behaviors as the work of “champions and worshipers of God” (Allah, Odudumare, Chukwu, or Abasi Ibom), their Supreme Being.<sup>516</sup> To these situations, we find relevance in the foundation of biblical monotheism established for us by the prophets Elijah, Elisha, Amos, and Hosea, and later fully developed in Deutero-Isaiah. In the teachings of each of these prophets, we find a hearty denunciation of violence, syncretism, unhealthy particularism, and unfaithfulness. We also find the value of a true monotheistic God who provides for, heals, unites, and reaches out to people of all cultures and nations, Jewish and Gentile alike.

---

<sup>513</sup>. Nyoyoko, “Dialogue and Inculturation” 105-132.

<sup>514</sup>. Nyoyoko, “Dialogue and Inculturation” 110-111.

<sup>515</sup>. Udoekpo, *Worship in Amos 5* 121.

<sup>516</sup>. Udoekpo, *Worship in Amos 5* 121.

## **Conclusion**

The foregoing contextual essay demonstrates that the early prophetic claims of exclusive worship of Yhwh developed gradually through a process of convergence, assimilation and differentiation, and alienation and intolerance. After the exile in Babylon, it generated into a self-conscious, radical monotheism. Prior to this time, it appears that worship of Baal, El, Asharah, and other deities monolatrously existed alongside the worship of Yhwh. This situation is comparable to the concept of God and worship in Africa today. As in traditional African society, in Israel, Baalism and other gods were recognized, and Israelites practiced religious expressions including sacrifices, divination, necromancy, vows, prayers, magic, and medicine.

It took the faithful work of prophets like Elijah, Elisha, Amos, and Hosea, who promoted worship of Yhwh alone, to lay the groundwork of what would gradually emerge as a universalistic monotheism in Israel, “a light to the nations” (Isa 42:6; 49:6). The result of these prophets’ cradle of monotheism and early Yhwh-alone prophecy remains beneficial to many generations, including those of the post-biblical Judaism and in the stories of Jonah and Ruth after the exile. It is also at the heart of early Christianity and the New Testament theology of universalism, as expressed especially in the Synoptic Gospels and in Pauline theology. Today, it remains the heart of Western culture, with its theoretical empiricism and development of scientific methods as well as progressive thought. Above all, it poses instructive challenges to a divided and syncretistic Africa. It calls for healing and wholeness in our divided world. And it rejects violence, corruption, unfaithfulness, unpatriotic behavior and lack of pride in ones’ nation. It also rejects shallow provincialism and negative forms of pluralism, as well as the fundamentalism and religious extremism that are currently prevalent in Africa.

## Sources

- Anderson, Bernhard W. *Understanding the Old Testament*. 4th ed., New Jersey, Prentice-Hall, 1986.
- Barnes, Emery William. *The First Book of the Kings*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1932.
- Branick, Vincent P. *Understanding the Historical Books of the Old Testament*. New York, Paulist Press, 2001.
- Bruce, B. "Introduction to Prophetic Literature." *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, edited by R. Brown et al., New Jersey, Prentice Hall, 1990.
- Bruggemann, Walter. *The Prophetic Imagination*. Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2001.
- Collins, John J. "Daniel and the Minor Prophets." *Catholic Study Bible*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1990.
- Conroy, Charles. *1–2 Samuel, 1–2 Kings with an Excursus on Davidic Dynasty and Holy City Zion*. Wilmington, Michael Glazier, 1983.
- Day, John. "Baal." *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, edited by David Freedman et. al., New York, Doubleday, 1992, pp. 545–49.
- Dever, William G. *Did God Have a Wife? Archaeology and Folk Religion in Ancient Israel*. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2005.
- Fox, Nili. "Concept of God in Israel and the Question of Monotheism." *Text, Artifact, and Image: Revealing Ancient Israelite Religion*, edited by Gary Beckman and Theodore J. Lewis, Rhode Island, Brown Judaic Studies, 2006.
- Gnuse, Robert Karl. *No Other Gods: Emergent Monotheism in Israel*. JSOT 241, England, Sheffield Academic Press, 1977.
- . "The Emergence of Monotheism in Ancient Israel: A Survey of Recent Scholarship." *Religion*, vol. 20, 1999, pp. 315–336.
- Halpern, Baruch. "'Brisker Pipes Than Poetry': The Development of Israelite Monotheism." *Judaic Perspectives on Ancient Israel*, edited by J. Neusner, B. A. Levine, and E. E. S. Frerichs, Philadelphia, Fortress, 1987, pp. 77–115.
- Heschel, Abraham J. *The Prophets*. New York, Harper Perennial, 1995.
- Idowu, E. Boloaji. *African Traditional Religion*. New York, Orbis, 1973.
- . *African Traditional Religion: A Problem of Definition*. London, SCM Press, 1977.
- . *Olódùmarè: God in Yoruba Belief*. London, Longmans, 1962.
- Jackson, Henry, et al. *People of the Covenant*. 4th ed., London, Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Jensen, Joseph. "Monotheism." *The New Dictionary of Theology*, edited by Joseph Komonchack et al., Bangalore, Theological Publications India, 1996, pp. 674–676.
- Kelle, Brade E. *Hosea 2: Metaphor and Rhetoric in Historical Perspective*. Atlanta, SBL, 2005.

- Lang, Bernhard. *Monotheism and the Prophetic Minority: An Essay in Biblical History and Sociology*. Sheffield, Almond Press, 1983.
- Leclerc, Thomas L. *Introduction to the Prophets: Their Stories, Sayings and Scrolls*. New York, Paulist Press, 2007.
- Lineamenta: Synod of Bishops Special Assembly for Africa. Vatican, Editrice Vaticana, 1990.
- Long, Burke O. *1 Kings with an Introduction to Historical Literature*. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1984.
- Matthew, Victor H. *101 Questions and Answers on the Prophets of Israel*. New York, Paulist Press, 2007.
- Mbiti, John S. *African Religions & Philosophy*. New York, Praeger, 1969.
- . *Concepts of God in Africa*. New York, Praeger, 1970.
- McKenzie, John L. *Dictionary of the Bible*. New York, Touchstone, 1995.
- Nyoyoko, Vincent G. "Dialogue and Inculturation." *Reconciliation and Renewal of Services in the Church; Lineamenta for the First Synod Catholic Diocese of Ikot Ekpene Year 2000*, Uyo, Trinity Press, 2002.
- Park, Eung Chun. *Either Jew Or Gentile: Paul's Unfolding Theology of Inclusivity*. Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2003.
- Rowley, H. H. *The Rediscovery of the Old Testament*. London, James Clarke, 1945.
- Schreier, Robert J. *The New Catholicity: Theology between the Global and the Local*. New York, Orbis, 1997.
- Skiba, Richard J. *Pre-Exilic Prophecy: Words of Warning, Dreams of Hopes, Spirituality of Pre-Exilic Prophets*. Collegeville, Liturgical Press, 1990.
- Smith, Mark S. *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*. 2nd ed., Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2002.
- . *The Origin of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Steinstra, Nelly. *YHWH is the Husband of His People: Analysis of the Biblical Metaphor with Special Reference to Translation*. Kampen, Kok Pharos Publishing, 1993.
- Udoekpo, Michael Ufok. *Rethinking the Prophetic Critique of Worship in Amos 5 for Contemporary Nigeria and the USA*. Oregon, Pickwick, 2017.
- Ukpong, Justin. "Inculturation Hermeneutics: An African Approach to Biblical Interpretation." *The Bible in a World Context: An Experiment in Contextual Hermeneutics*, edited by Walter Dietrich and Ulrich Luz, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2002, pp. 17-32.