

From the West Semitic Pantheon to Israelite Monotheism

After Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (Oxford, 2001)

■ Ugaritic / West Semitic pantheon (c. 1400–1200 BCE) ■ Israelite / Judean transformation

West Semitic pantheon at Ugarit

Four tiers, organized as a royal "divine household" (pp. 45–47, 54–58)

TIER 1 · DIVINE COUPLE

pp. 41–45

El & Athirat

El presides over the assembly and issues decrees; his consort Athirat ("Lady," *rbt*) intercedes and shares in decisions. "Bull El" is called father of the other gods.



El, enthroned and bearded, in the posture of blessing — after the gilded-bronze figurine from Ugarit (Late Bronze Age).

p. 41

TIER 2 · THE SEVENTY SONS

pp. 45–46

Baal, Anat, Athtart, Athtar, Shapshu, Yarih, Shahr, Shalim...

The "great gods" (*ilm rbm*) — children of El and Athirat, the active agents of cosmic combat and natural phenomena. Baal, the outsider storm-warrior, still calls El "father."



Baal as striding storm-warrior with raised mace and vegetation-spear — after the "Baal with Thunderbolt" limestone stele from the Temple of Baal at Ugarit (Louvre, AO 15775).

p. 45

TIER 3 · SPECIALIST CRAFTSMAN

p. 46

Kothar wa-Hasis

The "general factotum" — builder of palaces and maker of weapons for the upper tiers. His homes in Egypt and Crete mark him as an outsider who serves but is not of the royal family.

TIER 4 · SERVANTS & MESSENGERS

pp. 46–47

Messenger-gods, military retainues, "divine workers" (*inš ilm*)

Minor deities who serve other deities — the divine labor force of the pantheon-as-household. Recipients of sacrifices but not members of the council proper.

Israelite / Judean transformation

Gradual "telescoping" of the tiers toward monotheism (pp. 47–49, 151–163)

STAGE 1 · YAHWEH IN THE SECOND TIER

pp. 48–49

Yahweh as one of the "sons of Elyon"

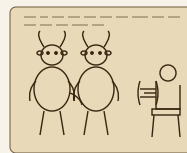
Deut 32:8–9 (LXX / Dead Sea Scrolls) and Ps 82 preserve an older picture: Elyon/El apportions nations among the divine sons, and Yahweh receives Jacob as his inheritance — a second-tier national god, not yet the head.

STAGE 2 · YAHWEH = EL, WITH CONSORT

pp. 47–48

Yahweh & Asherah — the Judean divine couple

El is identified with Yahweh; tiers 1 and 2 collapse into one. The asherah stood in the Jerusalem temple (2 Kings 21:7), and 8th-c. inscriptions from Kuntillet 'Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom bless by "Yahweh and his asherah."



The two bovine figures and lyre-player from Pithos A at Kuntillet 'Ajrud, bearing the inscription "Yahweh ... and his asherah" (8th c. BCE).

pp. 47–48

STAGE 3 · PANTHEON TELESCOPES

pp. 48–49

Yahweh alone, surrounded by a heavenly host

Prophetic critique of the asherah removes the consort. Tier 2 becomes a "vestigial" theophanic retinue — Resheph, Deber, Astarte reduced to Yahweh's servants (Hab 3:5). Tier 4 minor gods are re-read as *mal'akim*, "messengers / angels."



A Judean pillar figurine — the abundant clay type (8th–7th c. BCE) often associated with Asherah. Prophetic reform increasingly pushed such images to the margins.

STAGE 4 · MONOTHEISTIC RHETORIC

pp. 151–163

"There is no god besides me" (Isa 45:5)

In the exilic and post-exilic period, Isaiah 40–55 treats all other gods as non-entities. The four-tier household is replaced by a single sovereign God with angelic servants — the familiar picture of biblical monotheism.

CONVERGENCE & TELESCOPING

The core argument, in Smith's own framing

The original Ugaritic pattern is a patriarchal royal household of four tiers. In Israel, El and Yahweh converge, the divine couple is rejected, the middle tiers are demoted to servants or denied altogether, and the lowest tier is reinterpreted as "angels." Smith treats this as a long process of *convergence* and *telescoping* (pantheon-collapse) rather than a single moment of revelation. The structural account is developed in chapter 2 ("The Divine Council," pp. 41–53) and chapter 3 ("The Royal Household," pp. 54–66); the rhetorical shift to strict monotheism is treated in chapter 8 ("The Emergence of Monotheistic Rhetoric in Ancient Judah," pp. 149–166) and chapter 10 ("Monotheism in Isaiah 40–55," pp. 179–194).