



Left: Possibly the only portrait of YHWH, chief god of the Israelites. Right: Group studying Biblical Israel in seminar. Seated at left are Profs. Malamet and Yadin. Bottom right: Baruch Halpern.



with a throne room, curiously enough the story makes perfect logical sense. It is the first locked room murder account.

Q. There seems to be a basic difference between pre-modern and modern history. Could you elaborate on some of these differences?

A. The main difference is scholars today don't write historical narratives. They write arguments. In historical narrative you have to add fictional elements because you are presenting a story, not necessarily bogus, but fictional. You try as best you can to present the course of events as a story. In modern history writing, in Barbara Tuchman and any of a million other readable historians, the amount of embellishment is minimal. She tries to write what she considers to be the literal truth. When a guy like Herodotus or Josephus wrote history, he would throw in speeches for characters for whom these speeches weren't recorded. He would throw in characterizations for which he had no evidence, or evidence that was based on partisan interpretation. For example, one may write the history of the US and paint Nixon as a satanic villain. That type of history continues but it is not considered scientific history. It is metaphoric history.

Q. Was there some kind of understanding between the writer and reader of history in antiquity?

A. The ancient writers and readers were to understand that the writer was making some of this up. Paradoxically, this does not make it unhistorical. The question is, how does one present history? What is important to present so that the reader grasps the essentials? It is a dogma in Classical History that all of the speeches are made up. You can look at the speeches in the Bible and see that those attributed to David or Solomon, for example, in many instances contain concepts, words, and syntax that originate after the period in which that speaker lived. There is other evidence of concoction as well. Take the miracle stories. Someone had to invent them. If you slip out of the religious mode of analyzing this material and into a secular mode, which rejects the idea that the sun stood still or that Elisha summoned two bears out of the woods to eat 72 brats, you are left with the conclusion that someone somewhere dreamed this up.

Q. Are they then not trying to pull the wool over the reader's eyes?

A. Well, you can't say that for sure. That bear story has some pretty serious implications. What parent wouldn't kill for those bears? Some stories were not to be taken literally as we have been conditioned to take them by modern religious traditions. By the time they get to the historian, it is clear that he is taking them as sources and thinks they are true. But that's not unnatural. Fictional materials and metaphor get taken literally by people who don't know any better. A perfect example of this is Mario Cuomo thinking Miss Jane Pittman was one of the great Americans of the 19th century. If you're ignorant both of the history and of the writer's intentions, it is very difficult to understand an ancient text in the right way.

Q. What were the main goals of your research?

A. I was trying to establish the fact that writers and editors of antiquarian history believed that what they wrote had actually happened. That is important because a great many hypotheses of how this material was assembled and how biblical texts were written imply that the editors and historians were insincere, knaves, rogues, or idiots. On general principle, I'd work on the converse assumption, that they were not any of these. But in studying something like the Deborah story, or who architectural elements are integrated in historical narrative, and examining details included because of the author's ideological bent, one can establish that there is a genuine antiquarian or historical interest underlying this material. A great deal of material is in there not because the author thinks it proves his point, but because he is interested in what happened in the past. Now he's also trying to get at it for ideological purposes; but at the same time he's interested in telling the truth about it, and learn as much as he can from the few sources he had.

The other thing I did was work on the origins of monotheism. That was a delight. It involves a very complex theory focused on whether one takes religious metaphor to be literally true or figuratively true—whether one believes that an icon has an intrinsic divinity or is only a symbol of a god. I think that I can show convincingly that this was a major issue of concern in Israelite religion of the 8th-7th centuries BCE. It's very much parallel to what was going on in the Greek philosophical tradition in 6th-5th centuries BCE. So you get someone worshipping a sun and you have to decide if they are actually worshipping the sun itself or if they see it as a metaphor or symbol for some more transcendent deity.

Q. How is it that this phenomenon crops up more than once in the ancient world?

A. The ancients were great plagiarists but you get parallels all through history where opponents of a religious community accuse its adherents of worshipping a piece of

wood, while the worshippers themselves have no notion that they are worshipping a piece of wood. They think that they are worshipping something more ethereal. The closest modern parallel in western culture is Cromwell's campaign against Catholicism in England. He tears around England yanking down crucifixes, accusing the Catholics of worshipping idols. We can talk about whether these icons, statues, and pilgrim sites had an intrinsic sacredness to individual Catholics or even individual priests. Certainly for the sentient Catholic they served as nothing more than a conduit to the divine. It's very easy for Cromwell to say they are worshipping these symbols and invoke biblical precedent to demolish them.

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Q. How do you apply this issue to Ancient Israel?

A. You have to realize that Israelites had what we call angels and what they called gods—because angels ain't nothin' more than gods who have been demoted in title. Israelites, like any pious people of that period, sacrificed to these gods—angels. This was in no sense incompatible with being a devotee of the chief god, YHWH. On the contrary, the angels were part of his suite just the way Saints are in Catholicism, where Mary too is part of the suite of God. From this duality—one God, many gods—emerges a consciousness that later inspires Protestantism. The Protestants start reading the Old Testament and recognize this concept, that the subsidiary gods can be conceived of in opposition to rather than in symbiosis with the God YHWH. This engenders a religious crisis; is YHWH one or is he many? The answer is yes. YHWH is alone and one mustn't devote oneself to any other god regardless of the god's relationship to YHWH. Or God is one and alone but there are angels. That is what becomes mainline Judaism in the Second Temple period, and later mainline Christianity. God is one, and there are a lot of them. If you're Catholic, or if you're Jewish, angels are integral to the cosmos. They are the bureaucrats of the heavens.

Q. How does this affect perceptions of students in courses you teach?

A. I once taught a course comparing Judaism and Chinese religion. Jews and Christians in the course looked down on traditional Chinese religion because the Chinese have many gods. The Chinese couldn't understand this because as far as they could see the Christians and Jews had as many gods as they: they just weren't willing to admit it.

That's what I think is the nature of western monotheism. It is the profession that there is only one God and the practice of devotion to a gaggle of them.

Q. Is that a problem?

A. It's a matter of language and conception. You can say that there is only one God and the angels are his minions. And you can say that there is one God in charge of the whole universe. But you can also say there is only one God the way Spinoza or the way Jeremiah says, meaning that there aren't any other divine beings. The God is the totality of what is divine. The Greek philosophical tradition comes to the same position with an entity, Theos, which means God. The Chinese have a parallel position although they simultaneously affirm the multiplicity of the gods. You can cut up the realm of the sacred any way you want to.

What I want to analyze is the emergence of a consciousness that to have one God, not many, even if you do have many, is somehow superior to having many gods. Any turkey in a bar can come up with the idea that there is only one God. It happens. But the question is how this becomes socially valorized. How does it come to pass that a whole people or a whole nation can begin to base its identity on adherence to this doctrine?

Q. How has your year away affected your perception of the way things should be taught in your own area of study?

A. It's hard to communicate how exciting the experience was, and I've approached the Dean of my department, the President, and my Master, Deborah (Hobson), to set up a seminar for advanced research at York along these lines in the Humanities and Social Sciences. We're talking a tag somewhere in the neighborhood of \$75-200,000 a year. I would like to make it as general as possible so that anytime you get three or four faculty members interested in mounting such a seminar you would be able to draw to York top scholars in the particular field. It could be English, History, Anthropology—any field that is capable of attracting international luminaries to the University.

FEATURES

Having spent seven years as an associate professor of Humanities at York, Baruch Halpern took a year's sabbatical followed by a leave of absence. The first year he was attached to the Albright Institute for Archaeological Research and the Institute for Advanced Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, which is the world's centre for the study of his particular field: Israelite Antiquity. Elliott Shiff interviewed Halpern back at York this year specifically about his research in Jerusalem in the field of Israelite Antiquity and, in particular, monotheism.

York prof Baruch Halpern speaks about . . .

The ancient historians & origins of monotheism

Q. What sort of people did you come into contact with during the course of your year at the Institute?

A. There were 50 or 60 people in my field there who I talked to as well as worked with on field trips. This in itself was an experience that is not obtainable in Toronto. There weren't just archaeologists there. There were historians, theologians, papyrologists, exegetes, sumerologists, all sorts of obscure freaks. Had I known in advance how many people I would come into contact with, my wife and I wouldn't have had to eat dinner at home for the first three months. Jerusalem was shockingly vital. There was a seminar outside the schedule at least once a week. In addition, I got plugged into the archaeological community through my work at the Institute, and I was taken by excavators to every active site in the country.

Q. Were there any scholars in particular who you would single out as being true leaders in their field?

A. I was asked to participate in a seminar at the Institute for Advanced Studies which was run by the late Yigael Yadin and Avraham Malamet. It consisted of five historians and five archaeologists. Yadin came to scholarly prominence as the man who acquired the first Dead Sea Scrolls for the Israel Museum. He spent his life working on the Scrolls and just before his death he put out a beautiful volume on the Temple Scroll, a treatise on how the Temple and the Temple City should be run according to these wackos living down by the Dead Sea during the turn of the Era. Malamet is the premier historian of Ancient Israel today, with a publication list longer than your arm, but more important, of startling quality.

Q. What about the seminar itself?

A. They had invited top archaeologists and historians from all over the world to come and participate in this seminar. It was like graduate school with a vengeance. The top people in the world, lavish research funding, books, and most important, free coffee. And the seminars were marvelous, but it was the after hours interaction which was the most valuable.

Q. What primarily were you studying there?

A. The topic was Biblical Israel in the light of history and archaeology. An archaeologist would tell us about the history of a site; the historians would try to crunch that data and extrapolate from it in an historical mode. A historian might present a piece on a period and the archaeologists would want to bring it into dialogue with the data emerging from their sites. That was the principle on which it operated. In addition, we had people coming to speak to us from outside such as demographers and anthropologists. Included among these people was the

excavator who discovered what may be the only portrait of YHWH as yet recovered from an ancient context.

Q. Give the diverse cross-section of participants from different countries, what was the common language used?

A. The language of discourse was English. Of course, because of the international flavor of the seminar sometimes this English sounded like another language; Hungarian for example.

Q. What are the languages your particular area of scholarship requires?

A. Hebrew, German, French, Italian, Ancient Hebrew, Phoenician, Aramaic, Ugaritic, Greek, Latin, and Akkadian, sometimes a few others—Japanese is the latest.

Q. What were your projects for the year?

A. Primarily the nature of historical thought in ancient Israel; specifically what they thought history was and how one should write it. Basically, the material stems from sixth century BCE, give or take a century depending on where your dart hits the board. Some of this material is certainly older. Roughly we're talking about historical books from the Old Testament, Joshua through Second Kings. During this period they're writing antiquarian history which is 40 times more complicated than anything produced in the Ancient Near East before that. It encompasses all sorts of factors that are not singlemindedly coordinated with the main propagandistic or ideological axe that the author has to grind. As an historian, I see a genuine antiquarian motive behind these texts. The historians are interested in what happened and they're trying to reconstruct this in a sincere vein. The reason they're sincere is that they think history justifies their ideological positions, so they don't have to falsify it. On the contrary, they have to present it as it really was in order to justify their ideological positions. They have a stake in the truth of what they are saying.

Q. Doesn't that bring in the whole question of falsification?

A. They aren't falsifying although they often elaborate, or shall we say embellish. They even include materials that we should probably take as literary devices, as metaphors rather than literal truth, in order to actualize their reconstruction. I had a theory for a long time that the prose version of the Deborah story was dependent on the poem, The Song of Deborah. I found that every aspect of that prose version, right down to the minutest detail, with the exception of one stupid detail that I can't figure out, could have been drawn by careful reading from the poem. On the other hand the prose version differs very significantly