

Philip West, *The Old Ones in the Old Book: Pagan Roots of the Hebrew Old Testament* (Winchester: Moon Books, 2012), 128 pp., \$16.95 (paperback).

In spite of its title, this book has nothing to do with H. P. Lovecraft's horror mythos. West's work is an examination of what the author dubs the "Pagan" elements in the Hebrew Bible. His work attempts to show how early Judaism as presented in the Old Testament is (contrary to most people's expectations) polytheistic. As West describes the texts of the Hebrew Bible, "Most non-Jews and non-Christians, including most pagans, simply assume that it has nothing useful to teach them. This book aims to change that attitude by using the sacred Hebrew texts to expose the fascinating world of ancient Israelite religion, a religion much closer to polytheistic paganism than the official lines from Christianity and Judaism would have us believe." (6) The book's intended audience is one that is Pagan, unfamiliar with the biblical texts, and who is not especially academic in background (on page 10 West explains what an endnote is, and how to use one).

The book is arranged following the organization of the Hebrew Bible, and in particular the Tanakh version (5). The book begins with a general introduction to "what is the Old Testament" and what are some of the issues involved in its study. For example, West addresses who wrote it, when, and the issue of more or less accurate translations. Chapter 2, "Religion of the Patriarchs," follows the lives and religion(s) of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, especially considering the names for their (various) god(s). Chapter 3, "Yahweh, Mount Sinai and Moses," looks at the Moses narrative, the story of Exodus, and rise of the god Yahweh in Judaism. There is considerable attention to the notion of magic in this section, especially as it relates to the Egyptian origins of the practice. Thus West discusses the relationship between religion and magic, Egyptian *heqa*, and the role of serpent imagery. Chapter 4, "Religion in Canaan Before King David," is where West really begins looking at the contributions of the Canaanite cults and pantheons in early Judaism. Here he introduces the reader to the ancient city of Ugarit on the Levantine coast, from which come our richest sources of information about Canaanite

religion. West briefly summarizes the Ugaritic pantheon and considers aspects of this polytheistic religion that influenced or were directly adopted into early Judaism. Such elements include worship of the gods El and Baal, cultic prostitution, the use of temples, divination, human sacrifice, and the ark of the covenant.

Chapter 5, "Jerusalem, King and Temple," deals with the period of the United Monarchy, technically the reigns of Saul (whom West does not mention), David, and Solomon. It is during this period, West claims, that Judaism was almost entirely stifled by Pagan elements. For example, he describes Solomon's replacement of the Jewish priesthood with Canaanites at the start of his reign, and how he allowed his numerous wives and concubines (1,000 total!) to worship their own gods in Jerusalem, sometimes within the very temple he erected for Yahweh. As West put it, "All together, the impression gained is one of pagan (essentially Canaanite) religion. The deity of the Sinai desert by this stage seems to have been left far, far behind" (66). Chapter 6 is "Divided Kingdoms and Hebrew Goddesses." This chapter examines the period of the Divided Monarchy, when Israel and Judah were independent kingdoms. West's main focus here is the reforms of Josiah in the late seventh century BCE. The book 2 Kings records the "discovery" of the book Deuteronomy during Josiah's reign as king of Judah, and his subsequent attempts to "restore" monotheism in his kingdom. West's narrative follows with a consideration of the role of the prophets in the Bible, ending the chapter with a discussion of the goddesses known to have been worshipped in the Biblical texts (such as Asherah and the "Queen of Heaven").

In Chapter 7, "By the Waters of Babylon," West explains how true monotheism only developed after the destruction of Judah and the accompanying Babylonian Captivity. Once again, West looks at how polytheistic elements entered into the Biblical texts at this time, such as tales of the Creation and of the Flood, noting strong similarities to Babylonian narratives such as *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. The book ends with a consideration of the relative merits of polytheism over monotheism, once again strongly addressing a Pagan audience.

As a reviewer who is relatively well-steeped in early Judaism, it is difficult for me to ascertain how this book would come across to one who has never read the Bible but who wants to know more about Judaism's polytheistic roots. It is likely (and hopeful) that such readers who turn to West's book may come away with a new appreciation for the Bible and its place in Ancient Near Eastern (ANE)

religion, including Judaism. However, from a more academic perspective, there are numerous problems with West's work that cause it ultimately to be a poor introduction to early Judaism, whether for Pagan readers or otherwise.

My biggest problem with the book is methodological; specifically, what can "Pagan" mean in a time before Judaism? West defines Paganism as referring to "any religion apart from the western monotheisms of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In this book I use it broadly in [this] sense: for all the beliefs and practices of the peoples surrounding the Israelites that were originally unconnected with their national god Yahweh" (10). But West is discussing the rise of Proto-Judaism, well before the period of emergent monotheism in the sixth and fifth centuries. At this point, as is commonly known in ANE studies, (Proto-)Judaism was polytheistic. There was no monotheistic religion with which to contrast modern notions of Paganism. The argument, or at least the terminology, is anachronistic. It then becomes difficult to determine what exactly West is contrasting with his notion of Paganism—what is non-Pagan early Judaism? West would appear to take the worship of Yahweh (to the exclusion of the other deities such as El and Asherah) as the "core" of Judaism, as was indeed later the case. But early Judaism was not so focused, once again raising the problem of artificially contrasting "pure" Judaism with its "Pagan" elements, and especially when the author claims that this "pure" Judaism was eclipsed by Canaanite Paganism (51).

There are also substantial factual errors and informational lacunae. For example, in Chapter 1 West attempts to present the "Documentary Hypothesis": the theory that the first books of the Hebrew Bible were written by a handful of different authors only later collated into a single overarching narrative. West does not use the term "Documentary Hypothesis," nor does he present all the authors, introducing sources known in Biblical studies as "J," "P," and "D," but not "E" or "H." Likewise, he refers to the temple of Yahweh at Shiloh, which was actually the highly moveable Tent of Meeting, (aka the Tabernacle) There were no temples in the Bible before the construction of Solomon's temple in Jerusalem. West does not seem to realize that numerous authors have shown that there was no cultic prostitution in the Bible, and that the slavery and Exodus as described in the book of that name never took place.

The lacunae are most grievous for the Pagan audience. Even though West attempts to show the close cognates between the Old

Testament and other ANE literature, West himself seems to be ignorant of many of the latter works. He discusses *Gilgamesh* and the *Enuma Elish* (the Babylonian creation tale). But in the chapter on Moses he betrays no knowledge of the Egyptian *Tale of Sinuhe*, which provides many elements for the early biography of Moses. In Chapter 7 he reveals no knowledge of the story of *Atrahasis*, the original Mesopotamian creation tale giving the origins of humanity and the cause for the Flood, both with considerable parallels to the Biblical *Genesis*. West's knowledge of ANE goddesses is, quite simply, deplorable; his sole source of information is Raphael Patai's *The Hebrew Goddess*, itself a weak resource. As such, West has no idea that there was an independent and important Levantine goddess named Astarte; he believes that Anat was a love goddess; and he misses half of the goddesses in the Ugaritic pantheon, along with half the gods, in Chapter 4.

Exacerbating these mistakes and lacunae are West's outdated bibliography and suggestions for *Further Reading* (124–25). Most of his endnotes come from sources dating to the 1960s and 70s. Far better sources on polytheism in Proto-Judaism are John Barton and Francesca Stavrakopoulou's *Religious Diversity in Ancient Israel and Judah* (2010), John Day's *Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan* (1998), Othmar Keel and Christopher Uehlinger's *Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God in Early Israel* (1998), James Kugel's *How to Read the Bible* (the best introduction out there), Mark S. Smith's all-important works *The Early History of God: Yahweh and Other Deities in Early Israel* (2002) and his *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism* (2003), and Ziony Zevit's *The Religions of Ancient Israel* (2003). West misses the insights of more recent work on various ANE goddesses, such as William G. Dever's *Did God Have a Wife? Archaeology and Folk Religion in Early Israel* (2008), Neal Walls' *The Goddess Anat in Ugaritic Myth* (1992), and Steve Wiggins' *A Reassessment of Asherah* (2007). In the end, even the reader who wishes to learn more about this fascinating topic cannot get the information from West's book that he/she needs to continue study. Thus, although West's book may prove to be a good "gateway" book for the Pagan interested in Biblical studies, it will ultimately prove problematic and frustrating.

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