

Religion of Judah in the Context of Levant

Vít Hlásek

- ◆ **Religion** - human beings' relation to that which they regard as holy, sacred, absolute, spiritual, divine, or worthy of especial reverence

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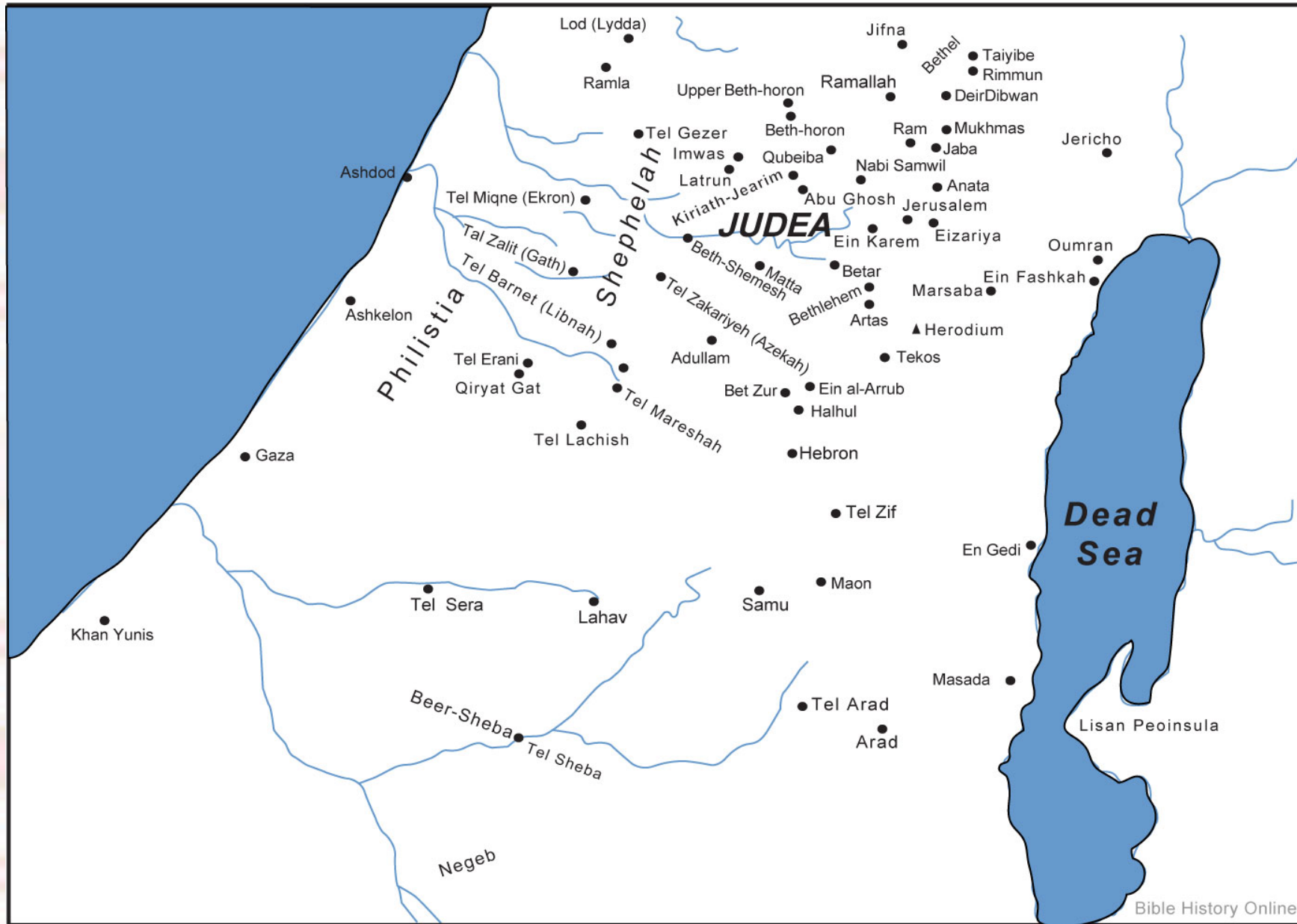
◆ Judah – tribe or territory?

- one of the 12 tribes of Israel
- an ancient kingdom of southern Palestine
- the southernmost region of ancient Palestine

Judea



MAP OF JUDEA



Religion of Judah in the Context of Levant

- ◆ **Levant** – historically, the countries along the eastern Mediterranean shores.



The Importance of Context

Ancient Judahite religion was **not static**, but rather, during the course of time, Judahite religion **changed and developed**. This is because Cultures do not exist in vacuum, but rather in a complicated **nexus of reciprocal influence**.

Canaanite Culture/Religion and the Religion of Judah

- ◆ Sources:
 - **Hebrew scriptures**
 - **Classical texts** (*The Phoenician History* of Philo Byblius)
 - „**Three great discoveries**“ - Mari, Tell Amarna, Ras Shamra (Ugarit)
 - **Other** epigraphic evidence and material culture

Continuity and Discontinuity

- ◆ Early culture of Judah cannot be separated easily from the culture of Canaan
- ◆ **Continuity** in:
 - Scripts
 - Language
 - Material culture
 - Religion
- ◆ Some scholars define Israelite culture as a subset of Canaanite culture

Continuity and Discontinuity

◆ **Discontinuity:**

Israel was distinguished from Canaan ca. 1200. This is clear from an inscribed monument of the Pharaoh Merneptah. His stele mentions **Canaan** and **Israel** as two separate identities.

Continuity and Discontinuity

- ◆ **Discontinuity** (Israelite features that are unattested in Canaanite sources):
 - The old tradition of Yahweh's southern sanctuary (Sion)
 - Israel's early tradition of the exodus from Egypt

Continuity and Discontinuity

◆ The Rise of Monotheism in Ancient Israel

(Christopher A. Rollston, *The Rise of Monotheism in Ancient Israel: Biblical and Epigraphic Evidence*, Stone-Campbell Journal 6, /Spring 2003/ 95-115)

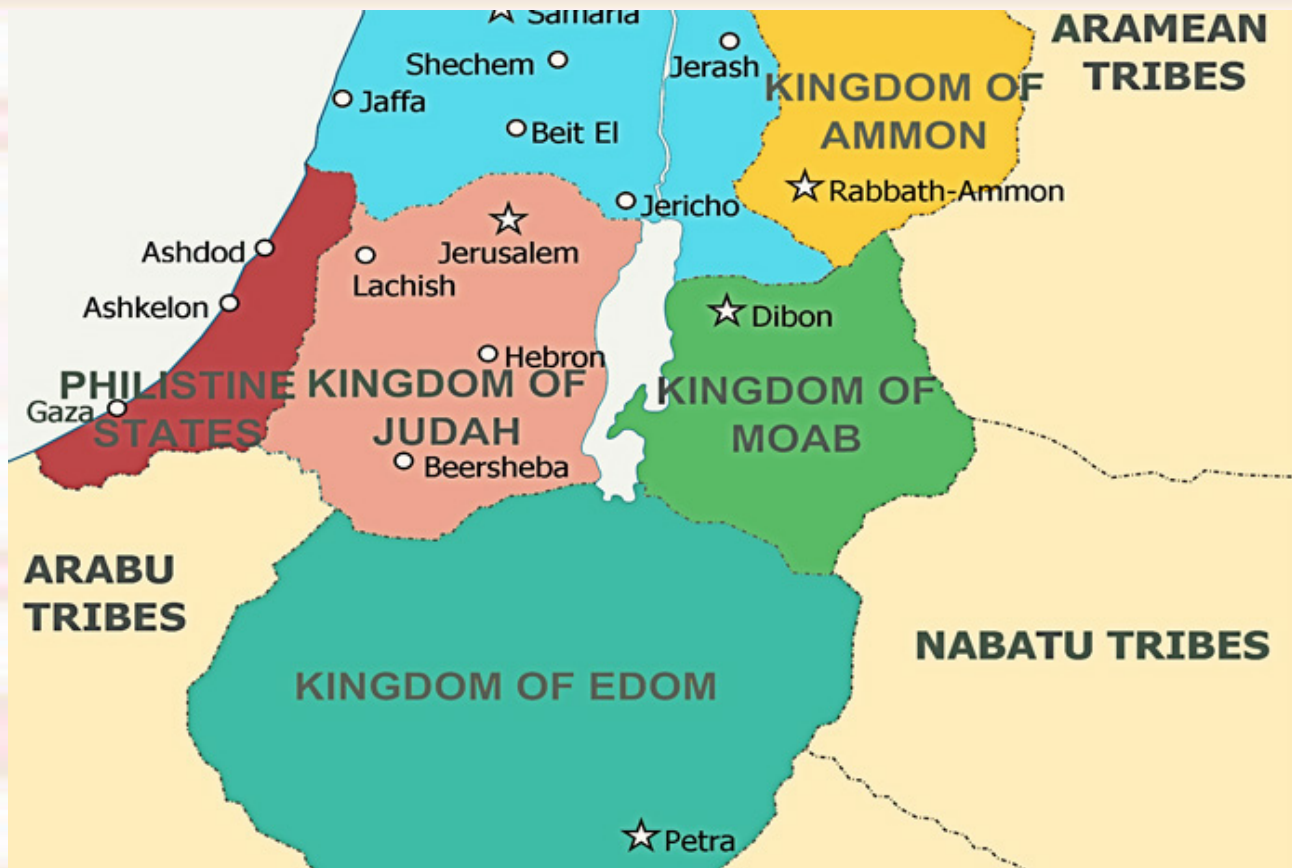
- Ancient Israelite religion was **not originally monotheistic**
- Monotheism **developed gradually**
- Monotheism (with its denial of the existence of other deities), become dominant in Israelite religion **by the late seventh century**

The Rise of Monotheism

- ◆ Religions of the Cultural Centers of the Ancient Near East
 - **polytheism** was the norm in ancient Canaan
 - E.g. in the Ugaritic pantheon: ʿEl and his consort ʿAsherah, Baʿlu and his consort ʿAnat, Yammu (Sea), Motu (Death)...
 - Some deities may become **dominant** (but no denial of the existence of other deities)
 - "**Assembly of the gods**" or "**divine councils**" (gods and goddesses with the head of the pantheon)
 - **Iron Age Israel** - small peripheral nation within a polytheistic cultural context

The Rise of Monotheism

◆ Religions of Ammon, Moab, and Edom

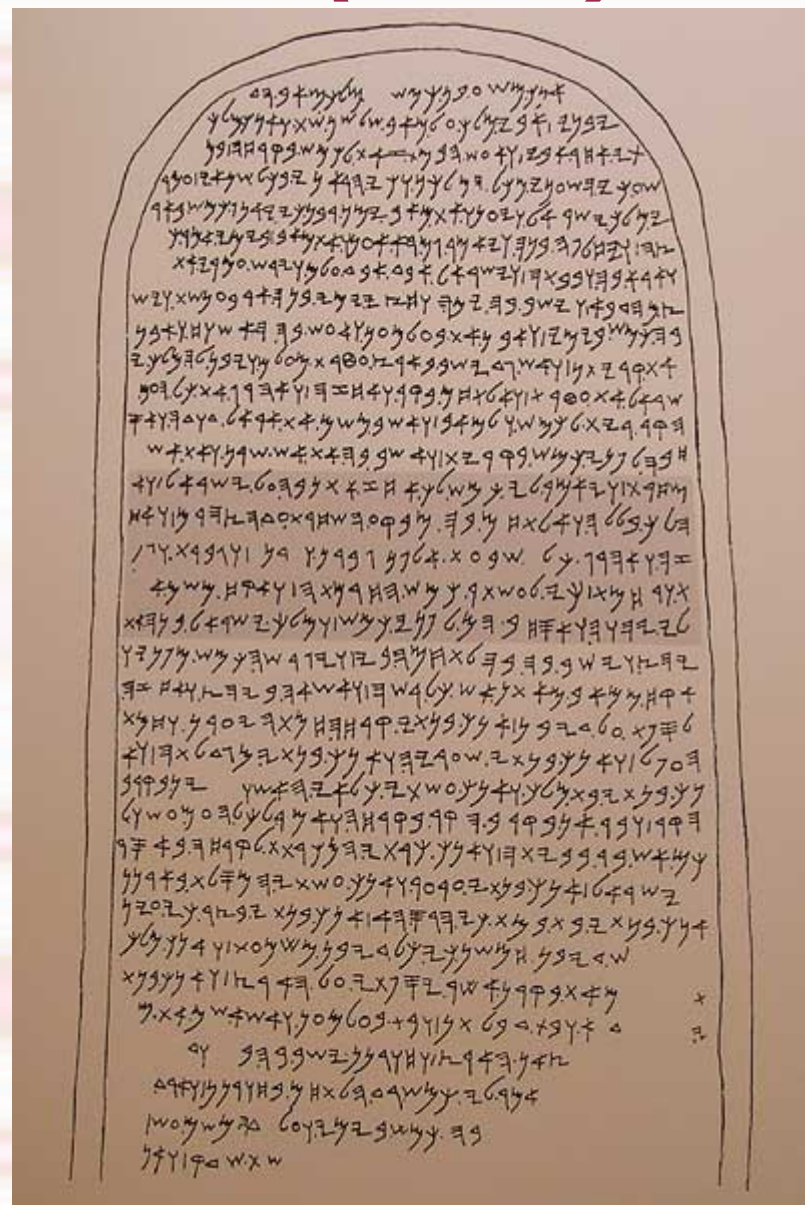
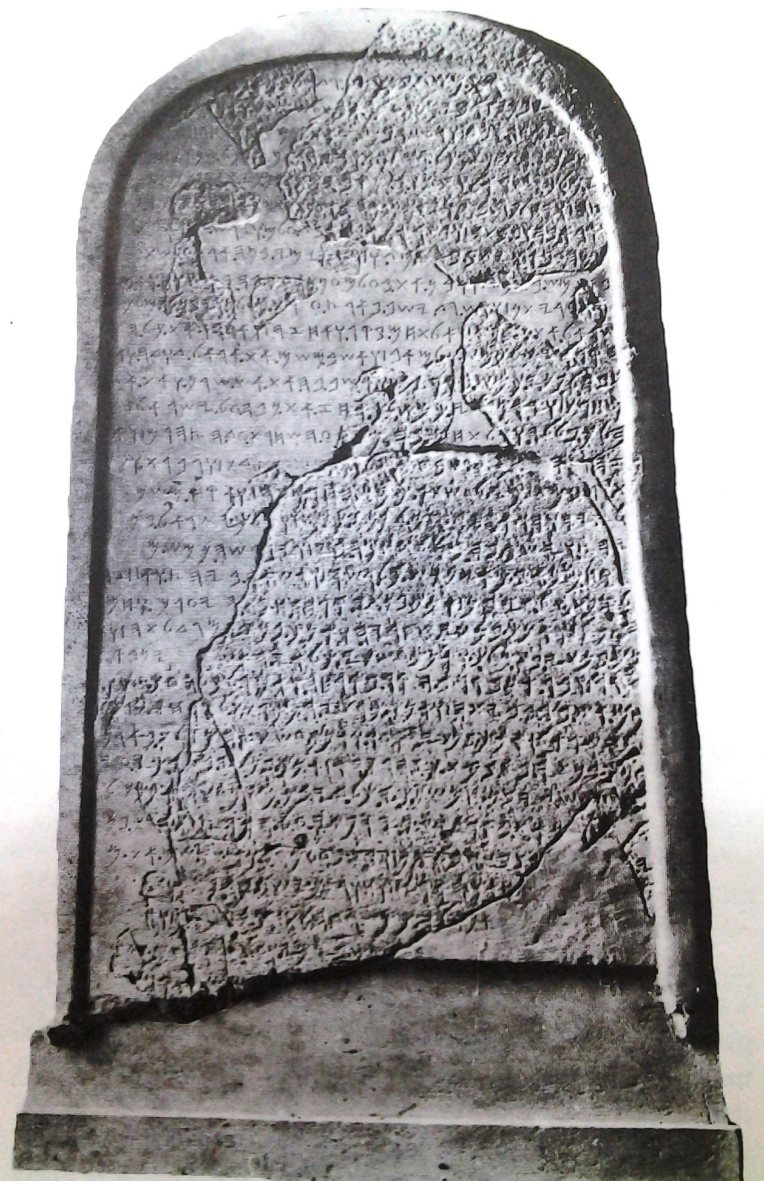


The Rise of Monotheism

- ◆ Religions of Ammon, Moab, and Edom
 - Polytheistic; the official national cult of each "state" possessed a "chief god" or a "national god"
 - Moab - Kemosh (Bible and the Mesha Stele)
 - Ammon - Milkom (Bible) or 'Il* (Archeology)
 - Edom - Qaus (ostraca, seal impressions)

* 'Il or 'El is common Semitic term for „god“

The Mesha Stele (9th c.)



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The Rise of Monotheism

◆ Biblical Remnants of Early Israelite Religion

*When human beings began to increase in number on the earth and daughters were born to them, 2 **the sons of God** saw that the daughters of humans were beautiful, and they married any of them they chose. 3 Then the Lord said, “My Spirit will not contend with humans forever, for they are mortal; their days will be a hundred and twenty years.”*

*4 The Nephilim were on the earth in those days—and also afterward—when **the sons of God** went to the daughters of humans and had children by them. They were the heroes of old, men of renown. (Gen 6:1-4, NIV)*

The Rise of Monotheism

◆ Biblical Remnants of Early Israelite Religion

בְּנֵי־הָאֱלֹהִים

- the sons of the God (the sons of the gods)
→ **male offspring of the head of the pantheon and his consort**

- Analogies found in Ugaritic, Akkadian, Mesopotamian and Phoenician texts

Early Israelite religion arose within the ancient Semitic world, spoke and wrote in Semitic, and initially accepted the common Semitic belief that there was a pantheon of deities.

The Rise of Monotheism

◆ Biblical Remnants of Early Israelite Religion

*When **the Most High** (**ʿElyon**) established the inheritance of each nation, when he divided humankind. He established the boundaries of the peoples, **according to the number of the sons of Israel**. For Yahweh's portion was his people, Jacob was his allotted inheritance.*

(Deut 32,8-9)

*When **the Most High** established the inheritance of each nation, when he divided humankind. He established the boundaries of the peoples, **according to the number of the sons of the god**. For Yahweh's portion was his people, Jacob was his allotted inheritance.*

(4QDeut)

The Rise of Monotheism

◆ Biblical Remnants of Early Israelite Religion

- 1) Yahweh was understood as a “national deity” and Israel was his “assigned nation”.
- 2) Yahweh was not yet the head of the pantheon; ^ʿElyon was.

The Rise of Monotheism

◆ Yahweh as the Head of the Pantheon (8th c.)

Yahweh becomes the head of the Pantheon; still no denial of the existence of other deities

- Yahweh and Ashera
- “Two Yahwehs“:
Yahweh of Teman and Yahweh of Samaria

The Rise of Monotheism

- ◆ Yahweh is the Only God (late 7th, 6th c.)
- Pure monotheism:
 - Yahweh is considered to be the sole deity
 - Other deities are considered nonentities

The Rise of Monotheism

- ◆ Yahweh is the Only God (late 7th, 6th c.)

Jeremiah 10:3-6 (NIV)

*3 For the practices of the peoples are worthless;
they cut a tree out of the forest,
and a craftsman shapes it with his chisel.*

*4 They adorn it with silver and gold;
they fasten it with hammer and nails
so it will not totter.*

The Rise of Monotheism

- ◆ Yahweh is the Only God (late 7th, 6th c.)

Jeremiah 10:3-6 (NIV)

*5 Like a scarecrow in a cucumber field,
their idols cannot speak;
they must be carried
because they cannot walk.*

*Do not fear them;
they can do no harm
nor can they do any good.”*

*6 No one is like you, Lord;
you are great,
and your name is mighty in power.*



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The Rise of Monotheism

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Isaiah 44:14-20 (NIV)

*14 He cut down cedars,
or perhaps took a cypress or oak.
He let it grow among the trees of the forest,
or planted a pine, and the rain made it grow.
15 It is used as fuel for burning;
some of it he takes and warms himself,
he kindles a fire and bakes bread.
But he also fashions a god and worships it;
he makes an idol and bows down to it.*

The Rise of Monotheism

- ◆ Yahweh is the Only God (late 7th, 6th c.)

Isaiah 44:14-20 (NIV)

*18 They know nothing, they understand nothing;
their eyes are plastered over so they cannot see,
and their minds closed so they cannot understand.*

*19 No one stops to think,
no one has the knowledge or understanding to say,
“Half of it I used for fuel;
I even baked bread over its coals,
I roasted meat and I ate.*

*Shall I make a detestable thing from what is left?
Shall I bow down to a block of wood?”*

The Rise of Monotheism

- ◆ Yahweh is the Only God (late 7th, 6th c.)

Isaiah 44:14-20 (NIV)

*20 Such a person feeds on ashes; a deluded heart
misleads him;*

he cannot save himself, or say,

“Is not this thing in my right hand a lie?”

The Rise of Monotheism

- ◆ Yahweh is the Only God (late 7th, 6th c.)

- Pure monotheism:
 - Yahweh is considered to be the sole deity
 - Other deities are considered nonentities

- Exceptions:
 - Colony at Elephantine
 - Accepted Hellenistic religions

The Rise of Monotheism

◆ Conclusion

- 1) Yahweh as the **national deity** of Israel (but not the head of the pantheon)
- 2) Yahweh as **the head of the pantheon** (but no denial of other deities)
- 3) Yahweh as the **sole deity** (with the explicit denials of the existence of other deities)

Too often, Jewish and Christian scholarship has tended to minimize **Israel's cultural connections** to the countries surrounding it...