

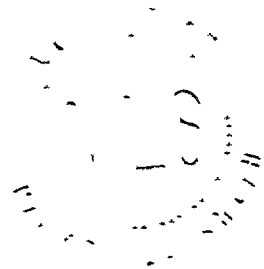
The Gods of the Nations

Studies in Ancient Near Eastern National Theology

Second Edition

Daniel I. Block

Foreword by Alan R. Millard



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Contents

Foreword by Alan R. Millard	9
Preface	11
Abbreviations	13
Introduction	17
1. The Origins of Deity-Nation Relations	21
The Priority of the Deity-Territory Tie	
The Priority of the Deity-People Tie	
Conclusion	
2. The Expression of the Deity-Nation Relationship	35
Genitival Constructions	
Bound Forms	
Pronominal Suffixes	
Personal Names	
Israel	
Edom	
Moab	
Ammon	
Aram	
Phoenicia	
Divine Epithets	
ʾAdon	
Baʿal	
Melek	
Mareʾ	
Roʿeh	
Human Epithets	
Limitations to the Concept of National Deities	
The Problem of Rival Deities	
Onomastic Evidence	
Inscriptional Evidence	
Iconographic Evidence	
The Divine Acceptance of Outsiders	
Conclusion	
3. National Territory: A Divine Estate	75
The Feudal Vocabulary	
Genitival Expressions	
The Divine <i>Nahāla</i>	

	The Divine <i>Yēruššā</i>	
	The Divine <i>ʿĀhuzzā</i>	
	The Role of the Deity in the Feudal Relationship	
	Divine Authority and Territorial Limits	
	Divine Authority and National Defense	
	Divine Authority and National Government	
	Conclusion	
4.	National Territory: A Divine Grant	93
	The Responsibilities of the Land and the People in This Feudal Relationship	
	The Role of the Land	
	The Obligations of the People	
	The Effects of Feudal Infidelity	
	Conclusion	
5.	The End of Deity-Nation Relations	113
	Ancient Near Eastern Accounts of Divine Abandonment	
	Sumerian Accounts	
	The Curse of Agade	
	Lamentations over the Destruction of Sumer and Its Cities	
	Akkadian Accounts	
	A Prophetic Letter from Mari	
	The Tukulti-Ninurta Epic (Middle Assyrian)	
	The Marduk Prophecy (Middle Babylonian)	
	The Seed of Kingship (Middle Babylonian)	
	The Poem of Erra and Ishum (Neo-Babylonian)	
	Esarhaddon's Rebuilding of Babylon (Neo-Assyrian)	
	The Autobiography of Adad-Guppi ⁹	
	The Cyrus Cylinder	
	Summary Observations	
	The Motif of Divine Abandonment in the Old Testament	
	Conclusion	
	Conclusion	149
	Bibliography	155
	Index of Scripture	159
	Index of Extrabiblical Materials	164
	Index of Authors	168
	Index of Subjects	172

Conclusion

It has become apparent that the ancient Israelites' perception of the world, and in particular of political realities, had much more in common with that of their neighbors than with our own. The theological framework through which all of life was interpreted is especially alien to many moderns. For this reason it is often difficult to understand the motives that underlay the actions of nations and their leaders, and to grasp the significance of their reports of those actions. The latter applies whether one is dealing with visual artistic documents or literary accounts. My investigation of the role of divinities in ancient Near Eastern perceptions of national identity and history has attempted to examine several crucial issues from the perspective of the ancients themselves. I may now summarize my conclusions in seven main points. As I do so I will note the extent to which the Israelite perspective shared or deviated from the prevailing viewpoints of their neighbors.

1. Although several different elements contributed to ancient Near Eastern feelings of national unity (common genealogical descent, a shared history, a unifying language, occupation of an identifiable geographic territory, etc.), all nations recognized specific deities as having jurisdiction over them. For several reasons, however, such gods are better identified as patron rather than national divinities. First, this special affinity between god and people was often felt by groups that were not recognized as nations. On the one hand, individual households, clans, and tribes within a nation had their own favorite gods. On the other, some deities were associated with specific places: mountaintops, cities, the seas, and so on. Second, their veneration often extended beyond the borders of a particular nation. Gods that were recognized as supreme in one nation were often secondary or tertiary members of other people's pantheons. Third, the involvement of a specific god with a specific people was frequently shared with other gods. Specific functions in relationship to a nation were distributed among several. Nevertheless, in the latter part of the second and the first two-thirds of the first millennium B.C. the tendency toward henotheism was strong. Among most peoples one divinity eventually emerged as the god especially responsible for the welfare of that group.

As for the Israelites, their fundamentally theological approach to national affairs was of a piece with the perspectives of their neighbors. Nevertheless, in several crucial respects their attitude (in particular that of the doctrinaire Yahwists) toward their own divine patron, Yahweh, differed radically from these. Whereas the population never seemed to rid itself entirely of syncretistic religious perspectives, the spokespersons for orthodoxy in Israel became more and more intolerant of any rivals to Yahweh. He alone was the God of Israel. Since the nation owed its very existence to his mighty acts of salvation, the people were to worship no one else beside or in place of him. He would share his glory with none. In fact, the Hebrews alone of all of the peoples of the ancient Near East developed a doctrine of monotheism. Other gods, even those worshiped by other nations, were nonentities. They were railed upon as nothing but the figments of human imagination portrayed in carvings of wood and stone or molten images of gold and silver. Yahweh was the only God in heaven and on earth.

One corollary of this theological position was the universal jurisdiction of Yahweh and the accountability of all nations to him. To be sure, his election and deliverance of Israel, his appointment of them to a special status among the nations, and his establishment of his covenant demonstrated that their relationship with him was unique. Nevertheless, all the nations of the earth belong to him. Their fates and fortunes are in his hands alone. Ultimately they too must answer to him.

2. The deity-nation association was intricately tied to territorial considerations. Gods were associated with specific lands as well as peoples. Indeed, their concern with the geographic entity often appears to have overridden their real interest in the people. Like human monarchs, they had staked out their territorial claims. Their role was that of divine lords who owned property of varying size, dependent upon their power to seize and control it. The temples represented the manors where these divine lords lived and from which their authority emanated to the far corners of their domain. It was the responsibility of their human subjects to maintain the integrity of those claims. Whoever those subjects happened to be was often immaterial. The basis of the latter's subjugation to given deities was simply their presence in his land.

The God of the Israelites had his special fiefdom as well, the land of Canaan. Jerusalem was his manor, his dwelling place. However, the witness of the Old Testament is consistent in its portrayal of Yahweh as a God primarily of the people and only secondarily of the land of Canaan. He called Israel to himself long before they were in the land. Furthermore, his assurance of them as his people remained steadfast even when they were divorced from it. The land represented a special grant to them, providing them with a geographic context in the midst

of the rest of the nations in which they would showcase the benefits of covenant relationship. But ultimately the whole world belonged to him. Just as he was sovereign over all nations and peoples, so his domain extended to the four corners of the earth.

3. The role of patron deities was to maintain the welfare and prosperity of their subjects. This was achieved by defending them against foreign enemies, by providing them with human shepherds whose task it was to maintain social harmony and justice, and by causing the land to yield its fruit in abundance for the prosperity of the inhabitants. The reputation of divine patrons depended upon the fate or fortune of a nation. Failure to provide for their well-being constituted a public demonstration of incompetence and impotence.

This was also the role of Yahweh in relationship to Israel. He was their divine warrior who went before them in battle. He appointed rulers for his people. He established the nation's principles of justice and righteousness, and functioned as divine judge when those standards were violated. His glory was at stake when the nation suffered defeat, and in particular when the population was expelled from the national homeland.

Although declarations of Yahweh acting for the sake of his glory and for the honor of his name are common, it is perhaps the gracious nature of his dealings with his own people that distinguishes him from all other deities. He is not capricious, egotistical, or self-indulgent, as are his rivals. The history of biblical revelation is a history of merciful condescension. Yahweh rescues a helpless people from Egyptian slavery (through no merit of their own). At the slightest hint of repentance he extends his grace and forgiveness to those who have rebelled against him. Yahweh assures his people that his covenant with them is eternal, for he is distinctively one who keeps his word. The creedlike proclamation to Moses in Exod. 34:6 sets him apart from all other gods:

Yahweh! Yahweh!
 A God compassionate and gracious,
 slow to anger,
 abounding in kindness and faithfulness,
 extending kindness to the thousandth generation,
 forgiving iniquity, transgression, and sin;
 yet he does not remit all punishment,
 but visits the iniquity of parents
 upon children and grandchildren,
 to the third and fourth generation.

4. The role of the people in this tripartite relationship was to fulfill the will of the deity. This was achieved by providing the god with a res-

idence commensurate with his divine glory, the conscientious supervision and performance of the cult devoted to his worship and celebrating his lordship, and the maintenance of his standards of social justice. Prosperity and peace would be the rewards of faithfulness and the demonstrations of divine pleasure.

All this was true in Israel as well. From the perspective of the Israelites, however, what was unique was the clarity of Yahweh's revelation concerning his will and the righteous nature of his standards. According to Deut. 4:8 no other nation enjoyed such a privilege. Whereas they were viewed as floundering about seeking to appease the wrath of the gods by whatever means they thought appropriate (without any assurance of having achieved those ends), Yahweh had spoken verbally and personally to Israel. When his wrath was provoked by their behavior, they could never plead ignorance. In his grace he had revealed to this people the limits and dimensions of acceptable and pleasing conduct. When the nation forgot the fundamental instructions given through Moses, Yahweh repeatedly engaged official spokespersons, prophets, to call the people back to their covenant relationship. When the nation finally fell to the Babylonians, it was not because they had not known the will of God. It was because they had stubbornly refused to do it.

5. The function of a nation's territory was to respond to the deity's blessing by yielding abundant harvests for the inhabitants. The land provided a basis for economic security and population growth. Not to have possession of one's own land was to be sentenced to a life of restlessness and vagrancy, ever at the mercy of the elements and enemies. On the other hand, a land with fertile soil and abundant rainfall should have ensured a nation's prosperity and stability. But the territory's fulfillment of this role was dependent upon the blessing of the deity. The latter in turn were dependent upon the people's fulfillment of the pleasure of the god. Failure to satisfy the deity would inevitably incur his wrath, which would be expressed by all kinds of disasters: drought, disease, famine, flood, invasion, and so on.

To a large extent, this view of their national territory was also held by the Israelites. The land of Canaan was Yahweh's gracious gift to them. It was a good land, a rich land flowing with milk and honey, eager to yield its bounty for Yahweh's people. But their moral and spiritual failures led to the stifling of the soil's productivity. Droughts, disease, and famine were not only punitive actions by an offended deity but appeals to repentance and return to the covenant Lord. When such appeals failed, Yahweh had to inflict the ultimate punishment: divorce from the land. The Assyrian and Babylonian policies of exiling entire populations were employed to remove Israel from its land. Although the land was promised to the patriarchs as an eternal privilege, title to

it was not automatic for each generation. The enjoyment of the privilege of living in Yahweh's land was conditional upon faithfulness to him.

6. The severance of the ties between patron deities and their land/people constituted the ultimate disaster. So long as the patron god was present in the land, the people could look to the god for protection and support. When a god would depart, either voluntarily or involuntarily, however, the theological basis on which national security was founded would be removed. The abandonment by a deity became a signal for whatever forces were on hand to wreak their destructive fury on the nation.

In essence, Israel's experience was no different. When Yahweh abandoned his land the divine support left and Nebuchadnezzar was able to move into the sacred city and the temple. The nation that had staked its security on his presence stood naked and defenseless before the conqueror. In Israel, however, Yahweh's departure did not reflect the supremacy of the deity of the Babylonians. He would not be dragged out of his temple. He abandoned his people of his own free will. In fact, Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians were *his* agents, not Marduk's. The persistent apostasy of the people had rendered Israel his enemy. The nation that had been the object of his grace now had become the target of his wrath. The nation that had abandoned its god now experienced the worst of all fates: abandonment by its own divine patron.

7. I conclude with one final observation that demonstrates how radically different was Israel's perception of their relationship to their deity from those of the nations around. In light of the emphasis on the permanent nature of Yahweh's covenant with Israel, the people, it is not surprising perhaps that the prophets should hold out hope for the nation beyond the dissolution of the deity-nation-land association effected with the fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. However, this study has helped us understand why the picture of the restored nation painted by the prophets has been given its present shape. If the restoration of the nation was to be complete, it had to be expressed in terms of: (a) a fundamental spiritual renewal of the people and the restoration of the covenant relationship; (b) the involvement of the entire house of Israel; (c) a return to the national homeland; and (d) the restoration of an indigenous (messianic) monarchy. Without any one of these elements, the process of restoration would have been perceived as incomplete, aborted. However, the hope witnessed in the prophets rested upon the conviction that in the end Yahweh would reinstitute the deity-land-nation association, and each member of the triad would faithfully fulfill its functions within the complex. When that great day would arrive, then the state of shalom and prosperity would return.