

Biblical Redaction and the Emergence of Absolute Monotheism: Implications for Religious Dialogue and Socio-Political Stability

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Abstract. One of the most fundamental causes of religious intolerance is the proclamation of absolute or exclusive monotheism. Across the globe, religious intolerance with the attendant violence is principally associated with the Abrahamic religions, namely, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Of all three, Judaism is not just the oldest but the mother of the rest two. The Hebrew Bible, which is the text of Judaism, appears to paint the picture of a nation that knew and worshipped only one God from the inception of their existence as a nation. But a critical study of the Hebrew Text reveals evidences to the contrary, namely, that the monotheism of the people of Israel was an evolutionary phenomenon that culminated in the post exilic era with biblical redactors playing key roles in shaping the absolute monotheistic theology of the Old Testament. This redactional influence on the Hebrew Bible and the implications for religious dialogue and socio-political stability has often been undermined in scholarly discussions. This is the engagement of this paper. The study employs the exegetical and hermeneutical methods applied within the framework of the redaction theory. Selected texts are exegetically studied to show the evidence of monotheistic redaction in the Old Testament. The paper concludes that the absolute monotheism of the Bible was a creation of theological editors and it has negative implications for religious relations and social stability. It recommends that to attain positive religious dialogue, monotheism must be liberal, relative, inclusive and therefore, tolerant.

Keywords: Redaction, monotheism, intolerance, dialogue, socio-political, stability.

1. Introduction

Religious dissonance with the consequential violence across the globe is mainly associated with the Abrahamic religions, particularly Judaism,

Christianity and Islam. Christianity and Islam have their roots in Judaism, which is the religion of the Old Testament. The major source of the history of ancient Israelites is the Old Testament. Historico-literary studies have shown that the text as it has come down to us today is a product of a long period of zealous theological retooling of the history of the “People of the Book”. Hence, the history of ancient Israel is a theological history. By implication, the Old Testament has influence on both Christianity and Islam. The theological motif of the text casts a veil on the pristine religious culture and the realities of their experience as they evolved in the context of their Semitic environment. At the surface, the Hebrew Bible presents a religious culture that is intolerantly monotheistic. The picture is that of a people that were generally monotheistic from inception; such that the copious references made to the people’s allegiance to other gods are presented as polemics attacking and condemning them for deviating from their original religious orientation. But there are internal evidences indicating some sort of henotheism in Israel. Henotheism, an advanced form of polytheism, is the worship of one head God promoted above others in a pantheon so that the other gods in the pantheon become subservient or subordinated to the chief deity. The chief deity worshipped in a henotheistic arrangement could be substituted with another, depending on certain factors.

On the basis of this observation, some scholars like Gnuse (1997) have maintained that Israelites evolved from a polytheistic background and grew through henotheism to become monolatrists. Monolatry is a sort of monotheism that does not deny the existence of other gods but rather involves a consistent allegiance to and worship to only one God adopted by the people. The difference between henotheism and monolatry is that the latter is consistent and permanent while the former is not. Thus, monolatry

is relatively monotheistic (Sommer, 2009). The basic feature of this religious orientation is that although there is unalloyed allegiance to only one deity, there is acknowledgement of the existence of others; and the Hebrew Bible is replete with proves of this fact. Thus, monolatry is a more realistic monotheism because it is inclusive and tolerant.

In ancient Israel therefore, there was acknowledgement of divine plurality and religion at first was not the problem but economic and political concerns which often caused diplomatic disharmony. The fact that the notion of divine plurality was prevalent in ancient Israel is indicated by the existence of divine council $\text{אֱלֹהֵי־עֵל} (\text{'adath-el})$ in the Old Testament. Divine council – $\text{אֱלֹהֵי־עֵל} (\text{'adath-el})$ – is a concept that refers to a guild of divinities that rule over the cosmos with God as the supreme head and others as his subordinates. Smith (2001) has argued convincingly that the divine council ($\text{אֱלֹהֵי־עֵל} = \text{'adath-el})$ passages in the Old Testament preserve the vestiges of early polytheism in ancient Israel.

Given the above background, Historico-Critical scholars, particularly redaction critics, have subjected the monotheism of the

Old Testament to investigation with a view to unveiling the factors behind the emergence of absolute and intolerant monotheism of the Hebrew Bible and there are allegations that it was the making of biblical redactors who weaved the history of the people around religion and created the notion of uniqueness, exclusivity and superiority of the “People of the Book”. In the following discussion, a few texts will be exegetically examined to show the evidence of divine plurality and the phenomenon of monotheistic redaction in the Old Testament with its effect on religious interaction and socio-political stability.

2. Conceptual and Theoretical Clarifications

It is important that the terms “Absolute Monotheism”, “Religious Dialogue” and “Biblical Redaction” are briefly explained to give the perspectives of their usage in this paper.

2.1 Absolute Monotheism

The conventional view of monotheism is perverse as it tends towards absolute classification, being discriminatory and segregative. The prejudiced understanding of the term makes it imperative for a clarification. Basically, monotheism refers to the worship of only one God. Its etymological derivation from the Greek words *monos* (single) and *theos* (god) gives its most elementary meaning, namely, the belief in and the worship of a single god. This derivation

does not suggest absolutism. This means that one could be monotheistic by worshipping only one God even while acknowledging the existence of other gods probably worshipped by other people or cultures, which in the real sense should be termed monolatry. But the popular understanding of monotheism is absolute reflecting the influence of the Abrahamic religions. This understanding is represented by Jensen (2003) who defines it as “The belief that there is only one God, a supreme being who is transcendent, omnipotent, all good, and creator of all that exist” (p. 674.).

Thus, absolute monotheism is the expression of the belief that only one God but no other exists that should be worshiped by all humans. Absolute monotheism denies the reality of other gods which are classified as false gods or demons. This is an exclusivist point of view that is inherently hostile with the potentials for violence. This religious orientation is in actuality unrealistic and inherently inconsistent because all anthropomorphic religious traditions ontologically appropriate the notion of divine plurality even if there is reference to a Supreme Being. That is why Opong (2002) sounded more reasonable when he explained monotheism as a pattern of theism that presupposes only one Supreme Being who devolves power to his regents or subordinate divinities that enjoy substantial measure of autonomy but yet responsible to the Supreme Being in the governance of the cosmos.

2.2 Religious Dialogue

To dialogue is to share ideas, to engage each other or one another in a peaceful talk or exchange mutually appreciated values. The concept of religious dialogue is birthed by the fact that most societies are not monolithic but heterogeneous in terms of religion. The concept therefore, presupposes religious pluralism. Religious dialogue also means religious relations or interaction which should be positive and harmonious. The fact that there are multiple religions which compete in most cases for attention and relevance in their environments and even beyond, accentuates the need for religious dialogue; which is in keeping with the principles of religious pluralism. According to Bidmos (2001), religious pluralism entails that the various religious traditions followed simultaneously by the different adherents who are of the same nationality should co-exist harmoniously. It is the instrumentality of religious dialogue that mediates such harmonious co-existence. This implies religious tolerance and a negation of the absolute and exclusive claim to religious superiority. Religious dialogue seeks to collapse the walls of prejudice

against other religious faiths. This debar adherents from attempts to proselytize the adherents of other religions by condemning their religions and presenting one's religion as *sui generis*; for as Ahmed-Hameed (2015) rightly noted, violent religious encounter is generated by overzealous commitment to the course of evangelism in Christianity and *dawah* in Islam which seek to convert members of other faiths to their religions. Religious dialogue makes it possible for the various religions to mutually appreciate and respect their respective values and beliefs.

2.3 Redaction Theory

The term "redaction" is a technical term for the act of editing a text. The redaction theory postulates that the theology of the Hebrew Scripture, much as it has divine undertone and motif, was shaped by theological historians doubling as editors who reflected their theological views based on their religious experience and the unfolding events in the socio-political and religious history of the people of Israel. As Collins (2004) furnished, Martin Noth inadvertently originated the theory in relation to Old Testament studies with the publication of his famous Deuteronomistic History in 1943. The theory subsumes redaction criticism as a method or approach to biblical hermeneutics. According to Ugwueye and Uzuegbunam (2014), redaction criticism refers to a method used by a researcher to investigate how a writer conveys his (or her) theological point of view by way of rearranging and editing pre-existing traditional materials at his disposal. Tanner (2000) has this to say about a redaction critic:

He was not simply one who did some minor editing or touch-up for publication. Rather, a redactor was one who took literary units of previous generations, interpreted it from his own historical perspective, and recompiled it in such a way to make it relevant (contemporizing) to his own generation (p. 24.).

This theory therefore, holds that "the biblical sources from which the entire history of ancient Israel was created were at various points, due to certain religious cum socio-political currents, subjectively rethreaded to achieve some theological objectives" (Omosor, 2019). Scholars are not in agreement about the individual identity of the redactors and the exact time the activities began. However, there is a consensus that they must have included Yahwist scribes and the writing prophets and that there was constant theological shift in the perception and interpretation of realities among the theological

editors whose activities spanned from late monarchical period to the post exilic era when the theological outlook of the Old Testament became more permanently defined. Hence, Person (2002) refers to the guild of editors as an institution or a school of which the tradition continued from one era to another with new entrants sustaining and retooling the theological perspectives.

This writer also views textual corruption as a form of textual redaction. By textual corruption is meant the scribal errors committed in the process of reproducing the text. The text was reproduced by two methods. A scribe either read the text to a number of copyists to mass-produce it or a few scribes copied directly from the text. Four types of errors emanated from this processes, namely, error of hearing, error of sight, deliberate alteration and addition of marginal notations. With the loss of the original Hebrew Text (the Urtext), there were many manuscripts in circulation with different readings in some instances. Although efforts were made to standardize the text by the *Sopherim* and the *Masorets*, there still exist textual errors which twist the theological nuances of the text due to interpolations, expurgations and extraneous comments or interpretations.

3. Divine Plurality in Ancient Israelite Religion

The Israelites obviously had a unique religious understanding owing to their sublime notion of God (monotheism) which developed from the Yahwism introduced to them by Moses; but a very close investigation shows that there was plurality of divinities in their religious understanding. It is important to note the fact that ancient Israel was born and shaped in the world of the Ancient Near East. Pitkanen (2004) aptly states that Israel was born in Egypt and grew to become a nation in Canaan. As such, Israel shared so much in common with other Near Eastern nations, particularly Canaan in terms of religious worldview. In Canaan, the cosmos is structured in such a manner that deities were ranked, with ʾEl (ʾEl, God) as the head of the pantheon while *Baal* and *Asherah* ranked next. Similarly, the name of Israelites God is ʾEl (ʾEl, God) and passages in the Hebrew text indicate that Baal and Asherah also featured in Israelite Temple (I Kgs 15: 12-14). Apart from the mention of these deities, there are numerous passages suggesting that the Israelite God was not alone in the cosmos but functioned in collaboration with other divine beings. As noted in the introduction, divine council (עֲדָת־אֱלֹהִים) passages are the most implicating evidences for this claim. A few of mention of such passages would serve for illustration.

Gen. 1: 26 implicates divine plurality in early Israel. The text reads וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים נַעֲשֶׂה אָדָם בְּצַלְמֵנוּ וְיִרְדּוּ – And God said, “let us make man in our image and likeness”. The cohortative נַעֲשֶׂה (let us make) and the phrase בְּצַלְמֵנוּ (in our image) convey the sense of plurality suggesting many divinities. Meanwhile, the Hebrew word אֱלֹהִים (*Elohim*) is morphologically plural. In Hebrew grammar, אֱל refers to God in singular while אֱלֹהִים ought to be the plural form. Semantically however, whereas אֱלֹהִים is translated as singular God when used to refer to Israelite Deity, it is rendered as gods when referring to the deities of other nations. The point in this verse is that אֱלֹהִים (gods/God), נַעֲשֶׂה (let us make) and בְּצַלְמֵנוּ (in our image) indicate multiplicity of divinities. Some scholars have allegorically suggested that the rest divinities with God in that scene were angels (Heiser, 2004). But such interpretation is baseless considering the fact of the pristine pattern of Israelite religious expression. Apart from that, the Hebrew word for angels or divine messengers is מַלְאָכִים (*mal'akim*) while the singular is מַלְאָךְ (*mal'ak*). This is not suggested in the verse. More so, to refer to them as messengers is to categorize God as a messenger as well. Finally, even if the divinities are given as divine messengers, it does not strip them of the status of lesser gods.

Another passage that bespeaks divine plurality and implicates early polytheism is Exodus 32: 1-6 which tells the story of Aaron molding a calf (calves) as gods for the Israelites. Of particular interest is verse 4 which reads: וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלֶּהָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ אֲשֶׁר הֵצִיאָנוּ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם – ‘And they said, these are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt. It is obvious here that Moses was still struggling to introduce Yahweh or Yahwism to the people. Aaron made many gods for the people as the expression אֵלֶּהָ אֱלֹהֵינוּ (these are your gods, O Israel) suggests. This is in line with the fact that the Israelite being tribal in structure had tribal gods.

The expression הַשָּׁמַיִם (host of heaven) also refers to plurality of gods in Israel's religious ontology. This is evident in the throne vision of I Kgs 22: 19-23. In this passage, Prophet Micaiah tells of the divine council where יהוה (Yahweh) sat on the throne to deliberate the issue of Ahab and his prophets with the members of the ruling council. It is important to note that those members were not just messengers but cabinet members with initiatives to contribute ideas. This is because the passage furnishes that they made suggestions one after the other. Prominent among the members was a divinity simply referred to as הַרוּחַ (The Spirit). Most translations ignore the Hebrew

article ה (The) to render it as “a certain spirit”. This stripes the divinity of its definite prominence. McGinn (2005) suggests it to be among the lieutenants of יהוה (Yahweh). Rose (2000) remarks that the hosts were prominent dignitaries, not just servants of יהוה (Yahweh); which is in accordance with the idea of earthly royal courts where members are not necessarily servants but administrators in their own rights.

Lastly, Job 1: 6 is another case of divine plurality. It gives another dimension of Israel's notion of the divine world. The verse reads: וַיְהִי הַיּוֹם וַיָּבֹאוּ בְנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים לְהִתְנַצֵּב עַל־יְהוָה וַיְבֹא גַם־הַשָּׁטָן בְּתוֹכָם (Now there was a day when the sons of God came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them). Particularly significance is the mention of בְנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים (The sons of God or sons of the gods). It refers to the divinities functioning in different capacities in the cosmos. They probably came to give account of their activities. This draws attention to the fact that הַשָּׁטָן (Satan) was in attendance. There is nothing in the narrative to suggest that he was an intruder but rather he was cast as a member of the divine council, being one of the sons of God. It has been suggested by scholars like Boda (2004) that הַשָּׁטָן (Satan) played the role of a prosecutor against those who run afoul of the divine law and it appeared that the propriety and piety of Job so fascinated יהוה (Yahweh) that he mentioned him with approval to הַשָּׁטָן (Satan). Commenting on Zech. 3: 1-10 where הַשָּׁטָן (Satan) also played the same role of prosecuting Joshua the High Priest, Boda (2004) stated that הַשָּׁטָן (Satan) is not the Satan or the evil one personified as the Devil in the New Testament, but rather he is the prosecutor who is usually portrayed as an adversary in the Old Testament. It is reasonable to think that he was a member of the divine council.

There are numerous other divine council passages and those that unequivocally implicate polytheism of ancient Israel in the Old Testament. The essence of the brief survey above is to underscore the fact that the notion of a cosmos in which a Supreme Being presided over a guild of deities in the governance of the universe was prominent in Israel's religious worldview and these are trails polytheistic culture. That the identities of the divinities were concealed has been attributed to the editorial influence of biblical redactors whose commitment was to obliterate their polytheism and establish religious culture that relegates all other religions to the background.

4. Yahwism and Israelite Monotheism

The question as to whether the Israelites were originally monotheists or not has often reared its face in scholarly discussions on the religion and history of the nation. Scholars are on both divides of the argument. The preceding section has highlighted the fact that some sort of polytheism was known in Israel and that the existence of divine council preserves its vestiges. This has made scholars like Smith (2001) to postulate that Israelites gradually metamorphosed from a polytheistic religious culture towards a monotheistic culture. On the other side of the divide are scholars like Albright (1957) who believes that Israelites had an early revolutionary break with the polytheistic culture of its neighbouring environments such as Canaan. The position of this paper is that until the introduction of Yahwism by Moses, the Israelites were largely henotheists having evolved from a polytheistic background. Thus, the beginning of Israelites' monotheism is associated with Moses' Yahwism. It was a relative monotheism. By being relative is meant that while they were orientated towards the worship of only one God, they acknowledged the existence of other gods. Hence, Sommer (2009) describes Yahwism as monotheistic monolatry or a monolatrous monotheism.

There is evidence that Yahwism was not widely embraced in Israel at first. For example, the molten calf (עֲגֹל מִסֵּכָה) saga in 32: 1-6 indicates that יהוה (Yahweh) was not yet a household deity. Moses had introduced the Deity to them and had gone up to his mountain to bring the people his written instructions. Having delayed before returning to them, the people pressurized Aaron to make them another God. The expression in verse 4b: וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֵלָה אֱלֹהֵיךָ יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲשֶׁר וַיַּעֲלוּךָ מִמִּצְרַיִם (And they said, these are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt) shows both their unfamiliarity with יהוה (Yahweh) and their henotheistic culture as they were used to the worship of אֱל (God) as a principal divinity and other tribal tutelary deities.

Smith (2002) and many other scholars have contested that יהוה (Yahweh) was originally a tribal god and one of the deities that served אֱל (God), also known as עֲלִיּוֹן ('Eliyon, the Most High) in Israel. Deut.32: 8-9 is widely believed to be the preservation of an old Israelite tradition addressing this fact. In verse 8 we read: בְּהִנְחֹל עֲלִיּוֹן גּוֹיִם בְּהִפְרִידוֹ בְּנֵי אָדָם יָצַב גְּבֻלַת עַמִּים (When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when he separated the sons of men, he fixed the bounds of the peoples according to the number of the sons of God). בְּנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים (sons of God) in this verse as in many instances of its usage in the Hebrew Bible, refers to divinities under the influence or control of עֲלִיּוֹן (The Most High) or אֱל

(God). In verse 9 we read: כִּי חֶלֶק יְהוָה עִמּוֹ יַעֲקֹב כִּי חֶלֶק נַחֲלָתוֹ (For the Lord's portion is his people, Jacob his allotted heritage), Yahweh is presented as one of the בְּנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים (sons of God). These verses find parallel in Deut. 33: 2-3 where we are told by Moses himself that יהוה (the Lord) came from Sinai (וַיֵּאמֶר יְהוָה מֵאֵת הָעֵשְׂרִים בָּא קָדוֹשִׁים) and that he came from the ten thousands of holy ones. Holy ones (קָדוֹשִׁים) is usually used in the Hebrew text in the same sense as בְּנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים (sons of God) to refer to divine beings in אֱל (God's) council. Furthermore, verse 3 states that יהוה (Yahweh, the Lord) loves his people as all those consecrated (assigned or allotted) to him are in his hands (אֵף הַכֶּבֶד עִמָּם כָּל־קֹדְשֵׁיךָ בְּיָדֶיךָ). Again, יהוה (Yahweh) is portrayed as coming from among the divinities of אֱל (God) to receive his portion of people to oversee.

Whatever may be the arguments for or against this view, one thing that is incontrovertible from the passages is that אֱל (God) and יהוה (Yahweh) had different identities. Biblical writers would later conflate both deities to become one and the same divinity. The Kenite theory postulates יהוה (the Lord) as a deity worshipped by the Kenites in Midian which was probably introduced to Moses by his Father-in-law, Jethro, when he fled from Egypt (Mondrian, 2010, Sitali, 2014). After the theophanic encounter with the warrior-Deity and his assistance in the deliverance of the Exodus groups from Egypt, it became Moses' Hero-God which henceforth would be the God of the people.

The significance of these textual and historical expositions is in informing that Yahwism which was introduced by Moses was the beginning of the movement towards monotheism in Israel. Yet it was not an absolute monotheism but a monolatry of some sort. Even Moses himself appeared to have patronized some other gods or had some representations of them in the sanctuary at the earlier stage. This is strongly suggested in II Kgs 18: 4 which states that King Hezekiah of Judah removed the high places, broke pillars and cut down the *Asherah* and also broke into pieces the bronze serpent (called Nehush'tan) that Moses made and to which the people of Israel burnt incense up till that time. The question is why would Moses make a bronze serpent to which the people burned incense if not that it represented one of the spirits or divinities in the sanctuary? This is a further indication that the people evolved over time from polytheism through henotheism to monolatrous monotheism. Prior to the exile in 586 B.C, the Israelites were still largely henotheists even though there were pro-Yahwist circles that advocated Yahweh-alone religion. But

they were rather monolatrists and not absolute monotheists.

The valedictory speech of Joshua in Josh. 23-24 serves as an oral tradition recounting the wondrous deeds of their Hero-Deity, יהוה (the Lord), and the counsel to worship him was based on the salvific acts of the deity in their history. This is a model of conviction and persuasion as an approach to conversion rather than a zealous and coercive approach. It was because there were other options of deities to choose for worship. In Josh. 24: 15 he charges them to choose the god they would serve while he resolves to serve יהוה (the Lord) with his family. Similarly, when Exodus 20: 2 is read as background to the Decalogue, it would be understood that יהוה (the Lord) did not charge the people to worship him alone because he alone exists, but because he was the deity that delivered them from bondage. Hence, he said in verse 5 that he is a jealous God. Thus, there was no denial of other gods. That this later became the dominant view of the text is the handiwork of redactors.

5. Redaction and the Motif of Absolute Monotheism in the Hebrew Bible

It is practically impossible to exhaustively discuss all instances of redaction in the Old Testament. However, a few cases of redaction or textual corruption will serve to prove that there was monotheistic redaction of the Hebrew Bible. The first point to note is that there are variants of the Hebrew Bible and with the aid of extra-biblical materials and archaeological discoveries, textual critics have laboured to distinguish them and compare them with a view to passing judgment as to which of the variants is the most reliable one. Prominent among the variants are the Masoretic text, which is the basis for the translations rendered by the Jewish Publication Society, and the Greek version of the Old Testament. Textual scholars have unanimously agreed that the Greek version of the Old Testament which is the basis for the translations in the Revised Standard Version of the English Bible is much more authentic being closer to the original manuscript (Heiser, 2004). This is because the Masorets had so much corrupt influence on the text.

One case of textual redaction is found in Deut. 32: 8-9 already referred to above while proving that יהוה (the Lord) was one of the divine beings under אֱלֹהִים (God) or עֲלִיּוֹן ('Eliyon, the Most High). Verse 8 is the point of contention which affects the interpretation of verse 9. The difference is noted as follows:

Masoretic Text: בְּהַנְחִיל עֲלֵיוֹן גּוֹיִם בְּהַפְרִידוֹ בְּנֵי אָדָם יִצָּב גְּבֻלַת עַמִּים לְמִסְפַּר בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל

When the Most High gave nations their homes and set the divisions of men, he fixed the boundaries of peoples in relation to Israel's numbers (JPS Hebrew-English TaNaKh).

ii. When the Most High divided to the nations their inheritance, when he separated the sons of Adam, he set the bounds of the people according to the number of the children of Israel (KJV)

Septuagint Text: בְּהַנְחִיל עֲלֵיוֹן גּוֹיִם בְּהַפְרִידוֹ בְּנֵי אָדָם יִצָּב גְּבֻלַת עַמִּים לְמִסְפַּר בְּנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים

When the Most High gave to the nations their inheritance, when he separated the sons of men, he fixed the bounds of the peoples according to the number of the sons of God (RSV).

It would be observed that the Masoretic Text reads בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל (children or sons of Israel) while the Septuagint Text reads בְּנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים (sons of God).

The verse in question presents one of the oldest traditions in ancient Israel. It captures the cosmic activity of אֱלֹהִים (God) or עֲלִיּוֹן ('Eliyon, the Most High) which is cast in the role of the Supreme Being who delineated the boundaries of nations and apportioned the peoples or nations to different divinities or gods. The phrase בְּנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים more often than not refers to divinities in the pantheon, court or council of אֱלֹהִים (God); compare the usage in Job 1:6. The nations were earth was divided into nations according to the number of gods or divinities. In verse 9, it is stated that the portion (חֵלֶק) of יהוה (the Lord) was his people (עַמּוֹ), which is Jacob (יַעֲקֹב) as his inheritance or allotment (נַחֲלָתוֹ). Jacob in the Hebrew Bible is a metaphor for the nation of Israel. This symbolism has a historical background; the name Israel was bestowed on Jacob by God during his theophanic experience at Peniel (Gen. 32: 23-31) and his son became the twelve tribes of Israel.

It is this impression about יהוה (the Lord) receiving inheritance from אֱלֹהִים (God) or עֲלִיּוֹן ('Eliyon, the Most High) that the Masoretic Text sought to obliterate. Hence, instead of בְּנֵי הָאֱלֹהִים (sons of God or divine beings), בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל (children or sons of Israel) was given. The reading in the Septuagint, no doubt, is more appropriate given the exegetical context of verse 8. בְּנֵי אָדָם (sons men or children of Adam) in the verse unequivocally refers to the people of the earth, which were grouped or demarcated into nations (גּוֹיִם); the bounds or boundaries of the peoples were fixed (יִצָּב גְּבֻלַת עַמִּים). It does not make sense that the nations were separated, demarcated or fixed according to the number of the children of Israel as the Masoretic Text suggests, rather it is more hermeneutically reasonable that the nations were

fixed according to the number of deities to govern them. That such textual variation exists is a proof of redaction or textual corruption.

The redactor is undoubtedly a Yahwist and his motif is to depose the theology that casts Yahweh as a second-tier or subordinate deity in Israel. In Canaan where Israel fully developed into a nation, the Chief God was אֱל (’El) and there were other subordinate gods. In Israel as well, אֱל (’El) was known from inception as their Chief god. Even their names have the ’El-epithet such as Israel, Daniel, Bathel, Othniel, etc. Smith (2002) had mentioned this fact when he submitted that:

The original god of Israel was El. This reconstruction may be inferred from two pieces of information. First, the name of Israel is not a Yahwistic name with the divine element of Yahweh, but an El name, with the element, ’el. This fact would suggest that El was the chief god of the group named Israel (p. 32).

As a hero deity, the exodus tradition and the salvific acts of Yahweh gained so much currency so that the existential realities of the people became woven around the idea of his supremacy. As Omosor (2016) has referenced, the idea of Yahweh’s sovereignty so encapsulated the biblical writers that it became the fulcrum around which the plots of the Old Testament revolved, such that the idea permeated every major account of deliverance, victory, success and expression of hope. With the expansion of Yahwism in Israel, the radical pro-Yahwist writers began to introduce some dimension of exclusivity of the deity. First they had to deal with the issue of the identity of אֱל (’El) and his relationship with יהוה (Yahweh). The popular *Shema* verse in Deut. 6: 4 is considered the foremost attempt of redactors to create a monotheistic impression. The text reads: שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה (Hear, O Israel: The Lord, our God, is one Lord). Semantically, this verse has two monotheistic nuances. The first is the conflation of two originally different divine names, יהוה (Yahweh) and אֱלֹהִים (Elohim, God) to express the notion of oneness. The effect is to convince the אֱל (’El) worshippers that the deities are the same God acting in their common history. This is also the theological essence of the conversation in Exodus 3: 6, 13-15 where the writer assuming the character of Yahweh explains to Moses (who is by implication the readers) that יהוה (Yahweh) had been the אֱל (’El) worshipped by his forebears, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. In Exodus 6: 2-3 he reaffirms it with the addition that he appeared to them as אֱל שְׁדַי (’El Shadai, God Almighty) but not as יהוה (Yahweh, The Lord). The second monotheistic implication of the verse is that it creates the impression that Yahweh, who is Elohim, is the only

one to be served. However, this does not imply absolute monotheism but a restriction of the people to the worship of only Yahweh (monolatry). Nevertheless, this became the foundation for the exclusive or absolute monotheism that eventually emerged.

The rendering of the Hebrew word אֱלֹהִים (Elohim) also indicates the tendency for monotheistic redaction in the Old Testament. It is basic in Hebrew grammar that אֱלֹהִים (Elohim) is morphologically plural. But the biblical writers render it as God for the Israelite Deity and as gods or even demons in reference to the deities of other nations or any deity other than Yahweh (Deut. 4: 32-33). For example, Psalm 96: 5 reads: כִּי כָל-אֱלֹהֵי הָעַמִּים אִדֹלִים וַיהוָה שָׁמַיִם עָשָׂה (For all the gods of the peoples are idols, but the LORD made the heavens). In this verse, the writer’s use of כָּל-אֱלֹהֵי (all the gods) is an acknowledgement that other people also worship gods; but he also renders the same אֱלֹהִים as idols in his bid to express Yahweh’s exclusiveness as no other qualifies to be called god/God. Further illustration of this fact is the use of the Hebrew word שְׁדַי (Almighty) to refer to the God of Israel in Exodus 6:3 whereas the same word was rendered in its plural form שְׁדַיִם as demons in reference to the gods of other nations. The redactors assigned meanings to the Hebrew words that have implication for divinity and monotheism in such a manner that Yahweh is accorded exclusive status. Through the writings of the post exilic redactors, absoluteness and exclusivity became the characteristic way of regarding the Israelite God. In some verses, the gods of other nations were denied, even when such denial is inconsistent with the reality of the Israelite religious worldview. For example, such addition is possible in Deut. 4: 35 which reads: אַתָּה הָרָאִיתָ לְדַעַת כִּי יְהוָה הוּא הָאֱלֹהִים אֵין עוֹד מִלְּבַדּוֹ (To you it was shown, that you might know that the Lord is God, there is no other besides him) and also in II Kgs 5:15 where Naaman states thus: הִנֵּה-נָא יָדַעְתִּי כִּי אֵין בְּכָל-הָאָרֶץ כִּי אֱ-מִי-יִשְׂרָאֵל (Behold, I know that there is no God in all the earth but in Israel).

It is difficult to accept the view that Naaman could have denied the existence of other gods. This is arguable based on his statement in verses 17-18. Naaman declares in verse 17: כִּי לֹא-יַעֲשֶׂה עוֹד עֲבֹדָה עֲלַי כִּי לֹא-לִיהוָה (For your servant will not offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any god but the Lord). This assertion shows that Naaman believed that other gods exist at least. Naaman’s plea for pardon whenever he accompanied his Syrian King to the House of Rimmon to serve the god further shows the acknowledgement of the existence of other gods. In the earliest period of the development of Yahwism

as a monolatrous religion, Yahweh was seen as one who is greater among others. This notion is present in various verses that rather speak of Yahweh's uniqueness and powers comparatively, not exclusively. Psalm 86: 8 is an example of such texts. It reads thus: אֵין־כְּמוֹתָּ בְּאֱלֹהִים אֲדֹנָי וְאֵין כְּמַעֲשֵׂיךָ (There is none like thee among the gods, O Lord, nor are there any works like thine).

Another dimension of redaction in the Hebrew Bible is the introduction of the concept of angelology which is an attempt to obliterate the fact of divine plurality or the polytheism depicted by the existence of divine council. It is consistent with the religious understanding of the ancient Near East to have a cosmos that is ruled by an assembly of divinities under the leadership of a Chief Deity. It has been demonstrated that Israel was not an exception. Several verses have been given to accentuate the fact of divine plurality in Israelites' religious ontology. But with the orientation of the Yahwists towards a pattern of theism that does not accommodate the view that other gods should be ascribed such vitality that characterizes a god/God, the notion of messenger class was introduced. It is the contention of this paper that those divine beings that functioned in the divine court were lesser gods. Psalm 82: 1 is unequivocal in this respect. It reads thus: אֱלֹהִים נֹצַב בְּאֶדְת־אֵל בְּקֶרֶב יִשְׁפֹּט אֱלֹהִים (God has taken his place in the Assembly of God; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment). As the presider God, he judges the other gods. The fact that the members of the council are gods negates the redactional relegation of them to mere messengers (מַלְאָכִים).

It is obvious that the absolute monotheism of the Hebrew Bible is not the realistic presentation of the original religious orientation of the Israelites but a perspective created by pro-Yahwist Levitical priests and prophets who redacted the Bible and for the purpose of inspiring the people to cling to Yahweh alone by creating an exclusive image of their God. But the question is how has this monotheistic redaction impacted on the society? What is the implication of the Jewish intolerant or absolute monotheism on religious relations and socio-political stability?

6. Implications of Absolute Monotheism for Religious Dialogue and Socio-Political Stability

Extreme monotheistic zeal breeds contemptuous interfaith relations. The religious intolerance that has brewed and spread crises across the globe takes its roots from the Abrahamic religions and the negative

effects of absolute and intolerant monotheism punctuate different periods in history. Judaism right from the post-exilic era has demonstrated high degree of religious fanaticism tending towards intolerance and violence. This manifested in the soured relationship between the Jews and the Samaritans during the post-exilic period which continued till the New Testament era. While the Jewish returnees from exile regarded themselves as the pure-blooded Jews, they classified the Samaritans as people with mixed blood because they have mingled with foreigners, intermarried and procreated half casts who could not be coheirs of the Yahweh-given heritage and privileges. They were segregated and discriminated against and even their religious center at Mount Gerizim was destroyed by the Jews. This is an example of how religious sentiments could create racial effects. That this was a problem in the time of Jesus is evident in the Parable of the Good Samaritan where Jesus employed the metaphor of "love and neighbourhood" to place humanity above religion. Even Christ himself was a victim of the Jewish religious fundamentalism for he died for not fitting into the criteria of the expected Messiah. Thus he was classified as a blasphemer who had come to desecrate their sacred religion and ridicule their God.

The case of anti-Semitism and the resultant Maccabean Revolt during the reign of the Seleucids, particularly Antiochus IV Epiphanes, in the Hellenistic period bears evidence of how overzealous religious disposition can cause politically motivated religious crises or religiously motivated political crises. The Deuteronomistic redactors had erected the theological bias in the mind of the Jews that political relations or struggle between Israel and other nations was invariably a struggle between Yahweh the "living God" and the "fake" gods of those nations (II Kgs 19: 15-19) and Yahweh and his people must have victory to prove that the Yahweh alone exists and his followers are the only true people. Thus, the fanatical monotheistic Jews held their Yahwistic faith above state interests. This clashed with the Hellenization agenda of the Seleucid leaders which must have fueled the decision to decimate Judaism at that time which caused a violent resistance led by the so-called "pious ones" (Hassidim) or the Maccabees led by Mathathias and his children.

The absolute and intolerant monotheistic views canvassed by the Deuteronomistic historians among whom were the writing prophets, Levitical priests and scribes, who were also the Biblical redactors, was preserved not only in the TaNaKh but also in the non-canonical apocalyptic writings that came into circulation with the cessation of prophecy. Both

Judaism itself and these apocalyptic writings undoubtedly influenced the monotheism of the New Testament. It is important to note also that Islam must have been influenced by the Jewish monotheism as well as that of Christian monotheistic traditions. The Quran makes copious reference to Jewish prophets and patriarchs as also the religious persons which God (Allah) chose to reveal the truth to mankind. Jesus is acknowledged as the greatest prophet that came before Prophet Muhammad who is believed to be the last and the greatest ever. Thus, the influence of Judaism and Christianity on Islam cannot be overemphasized. Both Islam and Christianity have been in the flashpoints of religious conflagration. Violent clashes and destruction of lives and properties dot the history of the human relations of these religions. This is due to absolute claim to religious truth. Ayantayo (2005) noted:

At the religious level, conflict arises when each of two different religious persons in the same religious space claims a monopoly of religious truth. The impression is that one of them, on the long run, is holding onto a wrong religion or a truthful religion. The two of them cannot hold the same truth at the same time, hence the occurrence of opposition, friction, incompatibility, antagonism, hostility, clash, dispute, fight, quarrel and war between them (p. 56-57).

The problems in the Middle East, Chad, Sudan, Tanzania, Egypt, etc. and the political terrorism that is raging and ravaging the world, despite being triggered by certain socio-economic and political factors, cannot be divorced from extreme religious ideology. When religion shapes political ideology, directs political actions and determines the pattern of relations, crises is bound in a pluralistic society where there is intolerant monotheism. This is because each of the rival religions would tent to use the instruments of politics and power to advance their religious ideologies. For example, in Nigeria there has been controversy over the application of Sharia Laws and the establishment of Sharia court of Appeal which is viewed by Christians as a step towards Islamization of a country that ought to be secularist. The Muslim Jihad and the Christian crusades are examples of the omen of religious dissonance orchestrated by extremism of religious truth claims which border on monotheism.

Due to extreme monotheistic claims and the attendant particularism, religious dialogue in Nigeria and other countries has been an illusion. Religious leaders pay lip service to the principles of pluralism and secularism. They engage in proselytization in such a

manner that demeans the truths held by other faith and even spell eschatological doom for them. This strains interfaith dialogue. Ahmed-Hameed (2015) enumerates the principles of proselytization to include:

Understanding that the essence of religious proselytization is to call people to God, and this must be done using exemplary words and conducts and by applying wisdom; conducting evangelism and dawah based on the principle of freedom of choice as enunciated by both the Christian and Islamic scriptures; making transmission of knowledge rather than indoctrination the object and focus of preaching; prohibiting provocative, insulting or inciting messaging or sensitization of own or other religions, and avoiding the use of the platform of religion or the notion of freedom of speech to spread hate messages or commit blasphemy; encouraging self-regulation amongst scholars and preachers of the same religion as well as supporting interfaith collaboration and cooperation for the sake of promoting textual and practical knowledge of the two religions (p. 85).

That religion has been an agent of socio-political instability in Nigeria in particular and the world at large is well documented. In a state of crises, there is insecurity and developmental problems. Lives are not only lost and properties destroyed, huge resources that could have gone into developmental projects are wasted on security. In Nigeria, millions of people are displaced and many of the internally displaced persons are in serious threat of existence due to poor living standards. There is urgent need to address the menace of religious intolerance.

7. Conclusion

The point of view of this paper is that there is a nexus between text and theological formulations. Thus writers influence their readers and it has implications for human relations and sociopolitical stability. It has been demonstrated that the text of the Old Testament was redacted at one point or the other by Yahwist writers to canvass a monotheistic culture. The claim by the Israelites that monotheism was the original religion of humanity as instituted by God is unrealistic. This is because the Hebrew Bible bears marks of pristine polytheism in Israel. Statements such as *אין כמוך באלהים* (there is none like you among the gods) and the existence of divine council (*עדת אל*) speak volume about this fact. The monotheism of the people of Israel was therefore an evolutionary phenomenon which started with the introduction of Yahwism by Moses.

Yahweh as encountered by Moses and experienced by the Israelites was a warrior deity who delivered

them from Egyptian captivity and intervened in times of inter-tribal or international wars. The notion of Yahweh's bravery and supremacy over all else diffused into every aspect of the people's life. Wars with other nations or tribes were conceived as a cosmic fight between Yahweh and other gods. Thus, defeat of the Israelites was viewed as a punishment for not being faithful to Yahweh while victory was the result of righteousness which consisted in obedience to Yahweh. This pattern of theodicy became the hub around which the theology of the Yahwists revolved.

In order to obliterate the polytheism that existed among the people as was evident in the traditions of Israel, the Yahwist writers undertook a theological review of the traditions. This activity came to crescendo in the post-exilic period. The exile was theologically interpreted as an ultimate punishment for the religious prostitution of the people. Hence, Yahweh's religion and his worship must not tolerate the belief in any rival deity. Expression such as *אֱלֹהֵי כָּל הָאָרֶץ כִּי אִם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל* (there is no god in all the earth but in Israel) and *אַתָּה אֱלֹהִים לְבַדְּךָ* (You alone are God) were employed to achieve this motif. Thus, the redactors presented an exclusive and intolerant monotheism. This bred such particularism and bigotry that was potentially a source of violence. It has been highlighted how this religious intolerance course negative inter-religious relations.

Absolute monotheism is a myth and a creation of overzealous religious persons who were privileged to shape the belief of the people of their time which has continued to affect the present day societies. All anthropomorphic religions appropriate some sort of belief in a cosmos populated by divinities who are superintended by a supreme being who may devolve powers to them. At best, monotheism is monolatrous which is relative and inclusive. The highest point of the religious advancement of Israelites before the exile was monolatry. As a result of religious claims of absolute and exclusive monotheism, religious dialogue is not achievable. In politics, economic considerations and social relations, the negative effects of religious dissonance have manifested.

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