

The Invention of God

by Thomas Römer

Reviewed by Sheila Ayala

Since the Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam have had such an impact on civilization, it is interesting to go back in time and trace the origins of the god that these religions worship.

The Bible cannot be read as historically accurate although there are references to places that do/did exist and some events can be confirmed from sources outside of the Bible. And yet the mention of such an important figure as Moses cannot be found in any records other than the Bible.

The book covers the Bronze Age from 3,000 to 300 BCE. Many of the stories found in the Bible are a retelling of ancient myths, such as Moses as a baby floating in a basket, the flood epics and even the birth of Jesus Christ. For such figures as Christ to become leaders, they had to have been born in a humble abode and of course born of a virgin. Populations at that time were polytheists and one of the many gods that Judeans acknowledged was a storm or war god. Over time, this

god took on the attributes of other gods such as El, Baal and the Sun god.

Before Moses came on the scene, the Judean god went under the names of El Shadday, Baal, or the Hebrew word for god – YHWH. When Moses encountered god, he asked god his name so he could go back and tell the people. There is a famous passage in the Bible when YHWH answers:

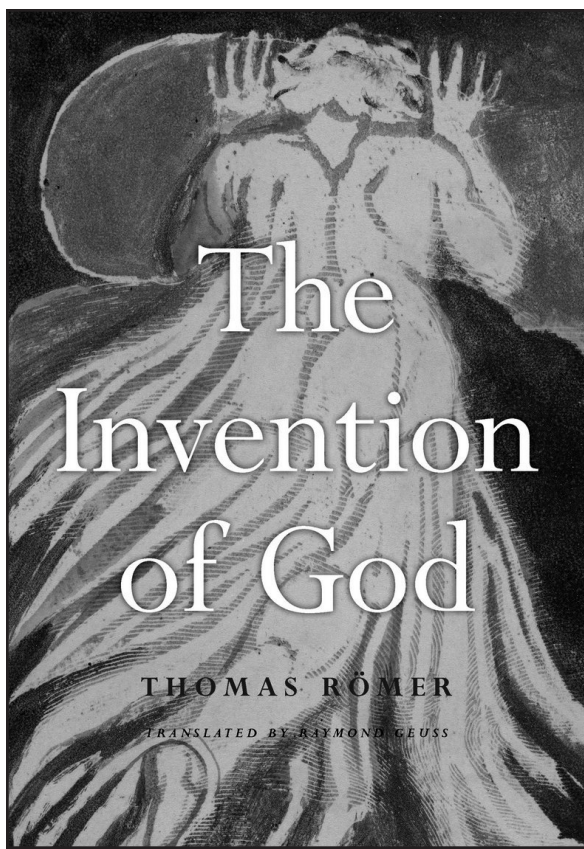
I Am that I Am.

From then on, YHWH was never called by name except on special occasions in a sacred place and, even then, only by a priest. And that is why the Bible is interspersed with a substitution of the word YHWH with the words *The Lord*. This made YHWH more powerful than other gods and moved him to the top of the pantheon because he didn't have a

name like other gods.

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Ten Commandments, Judeans were not allowed to worship any other gods but YHWH. Asherah faded from the scene and YHWH became the Judean tutelary god. Judeans also couldn't carve any image of YHWH so now they had an invisible god with no name.

After the Judean tribes settled in "the promised land," Jerusalem became important to them because it was a place of sanctuary and a resting place for YHWH. The sacredness of Jerusalem still holds true today for Jewish people.

Around 586 BCE, Babylonians captured Jerusalem and destroyed the temple. Upper class Judeans were deported to Babylon. This class included the priestly class and it was they who finished composing the books of the Old Testament, editing and re-writing from ancient scripts. Instead of blaming YHWH for their defeat, Judeans believed that they had not been faithful to YHWH and that they were being punished. This made YHWH a very powerful god indeed because he also had influence over the Babylonian gods that led the Babylonians to victory.

Judeans also accepted that there was no need to have a temple to honour their god. They now had sacred scrolls which could be read and taken anywhere. Eventually, around 538 to 520 BCE, Judeans were allowed to return to Jerusalem. Judaism had now become a highly developed religion but this religion was only passed on through Jewish bloodlines and served as an unifying force among the tribes. Unlike Christianity and Islam, there is no proselytizing in Judaism which made them insular as they didn't encourage personal involvements outside of their circle. As Judeans settled in other parts of the world, other societies around them viewed them with suspicion which led to centuries of persecution.

Judaism gave birth to Christianity at the beginning of the Common Era and around 312 CE, the Roman emperor Constantine in turn used this religion to unify the Roman Empire. From these two religions, Islam emerged in the sixth century, again using religion to unite people under one cause during the Islamic conquests. •

From the early nineties, Sheila Ayala has been an active participant in the Canadian humanist movement. Before retiring in January 2005, she was the Senior Administrator for Humanist Canada, formerly known as the Humanist Association of Canada.

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