derives Moses's knowledge of Yahweh from the Land of Median. Indeed, such texts are our earliest known reference to the Israelite Yahweh, and among the few anywhere outside the Bible (Dever, p. 150).

It makes perfect sense that Yahweh is a mysterious word in Hebrew if it was, in fact, an imported, non-Hebrew word. It seems that migration of small groups was a continuous process between Israel, Egypt and the surrounding lands; people probably went wherever there was a better crop and more food. According to Dever, it is likely that some of these groups moved into Israel from both Egypt and Median during the period of Canaanite collapse, bringing with them the religious traditions of Moses and Yahweh.

The political vacuum created at the end of Bronze Age Canaan seemingly resulted in a religious vacuum as well. It was in this vacuum that new traditions of emigrating from Egypt under Moses (which is in fact an Egyptian name, meaning "born of;" similar to Tutmose, "born of Tut"), of worshipping a desert deity named Yahweh, and finally the images of the Canaanite gods El and Baal could all be combined. The result was a new Israelite religion which grew with the new Iron Age settlements, and gradually became monotheist as the old gods El and Baal were absorbed into the new figure of Yahweh.

Thus the story of the evolution of Israelite monotheism is much more complex than we might have thought. Interestingly, the story does not end there but continues with the advent of Islam centuries later in Arabia. The Qur'anic use of the Arabic Allahumma is apparently derived from the Hebrew Elohim, the common Biblical word for "God." The Arabic word Allah, on the other hand, seems to be a contraction of "al ilah" ("the deity" or "God" in Arabic). Allah seems to have been an indigenous deity of the pre-Islamic Arabs, as evidenced by the name of Muhammad's father, Abdullah ("worshipper of Allah"). Thus the Qur'an unifies the Hebrew term for God (as represented by Allahumma) with an indigenous Arab one (Allah).

So we are left with a very interesting view of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition; one which may greatly change its interactions with other religious traditions in the current day. If monotheist worship of Yahweh in Israel started after Moses, it would seem that previous Biblical and Qur'anic figures such as Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph were all polytheist. Since these figures are all revered as primordial Muslims in the Qur'an, the surprising conclusion is that the definition of "Muslim" has changed over the millennia, along with the definition of God itself. In spite of his apparently believing in a polytheist religion that Muslims today would not even recognize, the Qur'an has no reservations of the high status of Abraham.

**An interesting consequence of this discussion is that over their disparate histories, the Judeo-Christian Muslim tradition winds up looking a lot like Hinduism.**

"Say: No, but follow the religion of Abraham, the upright." (Qur'an 2:135)

The unwavering Qur'anic support of Abraham is very significant for modern day Muslims. If we accept the historical evidence that Abraham was polytheist, then we have found grounds for a more pluralistic view of Islam in the many verses praising him. This is very relevant in the context of South Asia, for example, where fundamentalist Muslim leaders routinely criticize Hinduism for being polytheist.

More generally, given the historical evidence that even Judeo-Christian-Islamic monotheism has evolved from very different religious ideas, it becomes harder to criticize any other religion for not being monotheist. This enables us to develop a Qur'anic theology based on genuine respect and appreciation for other religions as being divinely-inspired, regardless of how different they may seem. The following verses are relevant:

"And for every nation there is a messenger." (Qur'an 10:47)

"To every nation We appointed sacred rites which they are to perform." (Qur'an 22:67)

"And unto thee have We revealed the Scripture with the truth, confirming whatever Scripture was before it ...
For each, We have appointed a divine law and a traced-out way. Had Allah willed He could have made
you one community. But that He may try you by that
which He hath given you (He hath made you as ye are).
So vie one with another in good works. Unto Allah ye
will all return, and He will then inform you of that wherein ye differ." (Qur'an 5:48)

The above seems to imply that the variety of religious faiths that we see in the world may all be part of a larger divine scheme of things. How do we know that all of these are not simply the "sacred rites" appointed to different nations, each corresponding to various divinely-approved "traced-out ways" (shir'at in Arabic, with a similar etymology as shari'ah)? They may seem different and strange to us, but so would Abraham's Canaanite polytheism. And the Qur'an is very positive about Abraham; so it becomes impossible for us to criticize any religion based on doctrine. As the above makes clear, the only way left to criticize any religion is based on the "good works" of its followers. From this viewpoint, Islam does not become merely tolerant of other religions, but actually appreciative of them.

An interesting consequence of this discussion is that over their disparate histories, the Judeo-Christian Muslim tradition winds up looking a lot like Hinduism. Both started out thousands of years ago with polytheism, and moved towards monotheism. In Israel that happened millennia ago, with the absorption of El and Baal into the figure of Yahweh. In India it happened about a century ago with the Brahmo Samaj (as a result of which, the poems and songs of the Bengali Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore are sufficiently monotheist to be used as hymns in Christian churches in Bangladesh).

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