Yahwism, Judaism and Christianity:
religions do evolve!

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> Darwin's recognition that plants, animals and human beings have developed in long historical processes has now become an axiom in almost all sciences, far beyond the sphere of biology. Everything that exists in the world has a long history of development behind it (Weber 1998:17).

Introduction

Currently, a considerable number of Christians refer to themselves as 'biblical Christians' who practise 'biblical Christianity' (cf. Carroll 1991:62-88).[i] This means that they practise the religion of the Bible. Referring to God as the 'Holy Trinity', they firmly believe that the biblical books present God in this way. They refer, inter alia, to the first creation story (Gn 1:1-2:4a), proclaiming that God revealed Himself as a triune God. Nobody, they argue, can deny that God said:

> Let *us* make human beings in *our* image, after *our* likeness, to have dominion over the fish in the sea, the birds of the air, the cattle, all wild animals on land, and everything that creeps on the earth (Gn 1:26).[ii]

The 'biblical God' used the first person plural to refer to Himself because He has existed in the plural from all eternity. He exists as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

They also refer to a narrative in Genesis 18, the story of the three wayfarers who paid the patriarch Abraham a visit. The narrative commences as follows:

> The Lord appeared to Abraham by the terebinth of Mamre, as he was sitting at the opening of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing over against him. On seeing them, he hurried from his tent door to meet them (Gn 18:1-2).

According to biblical Christians, the three men represent the Trinity. Although Abraham did not realise it at that moment, he had met the Trinity in the guise of three ordinary human beings.[iii]

Another Old Testament text to which they refer is Isaiah 6:1-13. This chapter recalls a vision experienced by the prophet Isaiah, during which he heard seraphim calling: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts: the whole earth is full of his glory" (Is 6:3). The seraphim used "holy" three times because they were in the presence of the Trinity.

We can frown on such arguments, but that is exactly how Guido de Brès argued in article 9 of the *Belgic Confession of Faith,* compiled in 1561, indicating that he had no sense of the strange world in which the biblical books had originated. He simply interpreted them as though their authors were acquainted with the Grand Narrative of Christianity, which, in fact, took shape only in the fourth and fifth centuries CE. He read the biblical books from a pre-critical, even an a-historical perspective. Such interpretations are to be found in all the Protestant confessions of faith written during the sixteenth century (Bosman 1987:43-49).

We cannot really blame their compilers, as they had no proper knowledge of the peoples and cultures of the ancient Near East. Moreover, lacking historical consciousness, they were unaware that the worldview of its people would have been entirely different from their own. It was only during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that scholars developed a historical consciousness. Further, the strange world of the ancient Near East became known only during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when scholars were introduced to texts newly discovered in archaeological excavations and then deciphered (Moorey 1991:25-86; Laughlin 2000:3-16). There was thus a paradigm shift in the study of the Bible towards the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century (Noll 1991:45). The change had a major impact on scholars' understanding of the religion of Israel, of Judaism and of the origins and development of Christianity.

This article presents a brief overview of the development of these religions and their relationship to each other as currently understood in scholarly circles. Following this, it argues that Christian theologians cannot engage in a proper dialogue with their colleagues in the natural sciences if they persist in adhering to an outdated worldview and fail to develop a historical consciousness.

Ancient Yahwism

Scholars now maintain with absolute certainty that the ancient Israelites did not believe in a triune god, and did not use the concept of a 'Holy Trinity' to refer to their god, *Yahweh*. They cherished totally different ideas about him. In fact, from its inception their religion had been relatively polytheistic, as they believed that there was more than one god in heaven. Psalm 82:1 and Psalm 89:6-7 exemplify this conviction:

> God takes his place in the court of heaven
> to pronounce judgement among the gods.
> (Ps 82:1)

> In the skies who is there like the Lord,
> who like the LORD in the court of heaven,
> a God dreaded in the council of the angels,
> great and terrible above all who stand about Him?
> (Ps 89:6-7)

Like all other ancient Near Eastern peoples, they believed that there was a supreme god who had a wife and many children, a family of gods. This family could also be depicted as a king with a queen, children, and a host of servants. The children were gods of lower rank, attending to the needs of the supreme god. The servants were also gods, but of still lower rank than that of the children. Together they formed the 'court of heaven', or the 'council of the gods'. As stated above, the gods of lower rank were in the service of the supreme god. Apart from attending to his needs, they had to keep him informed and were expected to give a regular account of their own deeds. The supreme god could assign specific tasks to the lower ranking gods, as evidenced in 1 Kings 22:19-23, and if they neglected them, they could be called to account. Job 1:6 reflects something of this:

> The day came when the members of the court of heaven took their places
> in the presence of the LORD, and the adversary, Satan, was there among
> them.

Psalm 82:1 calls the members of the court 'gods' (*'elōhîm*), while Psalm 89:7 and Job 1:6 call them 'angels' (*benē 'elōhîm*). This is a source of confusion, because the terms *'elōhîm* and *benē 'elōhîm* refer to the same group of gods − those of lower rank

in the court of heaven. The 'Satan' to whom the author of Job refers is not the Satan whom we meet in the New Testament, but is merely one of the lower ranking gods whose journeys the supreme god enquires about in Job 1:7. He is not one of the children of the supreme god, but could be classified as one of the servants whose task is to keep the supreme god informed about events on earth. He reconnoitres and reports back. In this way the supreme god is kept well-informed. He is all-knowing, thanks to his messengers!

Scholars refer to this hierarchy of gods as a pantheon. Archaeological excavations and research into the religion of ancient Israel reveal that the Israelite pantheon was structured in at least four tiers (Smith 2004:105-119). The top tier was inhabited by the supreme god and his wife. Below them were lesser gods, who had to perform specific tasks in the court. Below them was another group of even lesser gods. In the lowest tier were the messengers and dispatchers. In Hebrew they are referred to as *mal'ākîm*, which is usually translated as 'angels'. The angels are thus only the messengers and dispatchers who keep human beings informed about the plans and desires of the supreme god. Take as an example the 'angels' (*mal'ākîm*) who visited Abraham and then went to his cousin Lot (Gn 18:2, 22; 19:1, 12-13). We could also refer to the story of the barren wife of Manoah (Jdg 13:1-24). An 'angel' informs her that she will conceive and give birth to a son.

Readers also encounter two other groups of heavenly beings in the Old Testament. They are called 'seraphim' and 'cherubim'. The seraphim are winged 'snake gods' (Nm 21:6, 8; Dt 8:15; Is 6:1-3; 14:29; 30:6), while the cherubim looked like winged lions. According to one tradition, the cherubim were the guardians of the Garden of Eden (Gn 3:24; Ezk 28:14) which was located in the east. Another tradition holds that they were the guardians of the tree of life in the divine garden (Ezk 41:17-25). Apart from this, they carried the throne of the supreme god, indicated by the Israelite belief that *Yahweh* was 'enthroned upon the cherubim' (1 Sm 4:4; 2 Sm 6:2; Is 37:16; Ezk 10:20-22). There were thus statues of cherubim in the temple in Jerusalem (1 Ki 6:29-35), and the Ark of the Covenant stood beneath their wings (1 Ki 8:6-8).

Because Israel called their supreme god *Yahweh,* scholars now refer to the Israelite religion as *Yahwism*. This religion has mysterious origins, but scholars assume that this was the god venerated by the Kenites, a clan of the Midianite tribes (Dijkstra 2001b:81-84). Their main base was the territory south of Edom, but they also wandered throughout Sinai. A number of texts link *Yahweh* with mountains or regions in the Sinai Peninsula. The following may serve as examples:

> The LORD came from Sinai
> and shone forth from Seir.
> He appeared from Mount Paran,
> and with him were myriads of holy ones
> streaming along at his right hand (Dt 33:2).
> LORD, when you set forth from Seir
> when you marched form the land of Edom,
> earth trembled; heaven quaked
> the clouds streamed down in torrents (Jdg 5:4).

According to another narrative, Moses fled to Midian after he had killed an Egyptian (Ex 2:15). Here he married Zipporah, the daughter of Jethro, a priest of Midian (Ex 3:1). One day, while tending his father-in-law's sheep, Moses had a strange ex-perience. He came to Horeb, the mountain of God, and saw a burning bush, where *Yahweh* made himself known to Moses. He called him from the burning bush and commanded him "to bring his people out of Egypt" (Ex 3:10).[iv]

Although scholars agree that this is not a historical narrative, they do concur that it communicates something about the origin of *Yahwism*. Initially, only some Israelite tribes and clans worshipped *Yahweh,* a god well-known in the Sinai
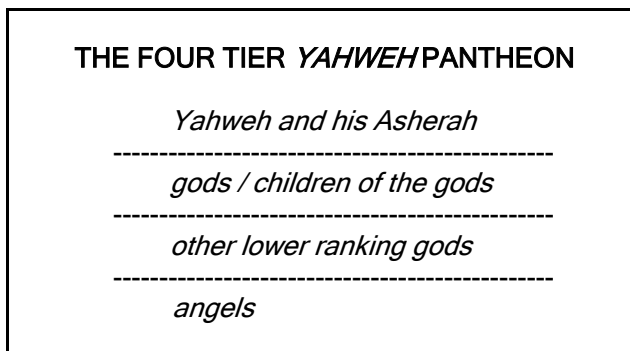
Peninsula. Later on, other tribes joined in. Some scholars are of the opinion that King Saul consolidated the tribes and made *Yahwism* the 'official religion' of Israel, after which David and Solomon merely continued the tradition. David brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem, while Solomon eventually built the *Yahweh* temple.

According to the religious convictions of that time, a supreme god had a wife. Years ago, Old Testament scholars were convinced that Israel was an exception to the rule. However, contemporary scholars are convinced that Israel did indeed venerate a goddess. Archaeological excavations in Israel/Palestine yielded numerous clay figurines of the mother goddess *Asherah*. *Yahweh* thus had a consort. The Israelite religion did not differ substantially from the Canaanite religion. *Yahweh* played the same role as that played by *El* in the Canaanite pantheon. Both were supreme gods and both had *Asherah* as their consort (Dijkstra 2001a:17-44; Dever 2005:209-251).

Yahweh is the creator god and father of the Israelites, just as *El* is the creator god and father of the Canaanites. Moreover, *Asherah* was also venerated by some of the Israelites, just as she was by the Canaanites (1 Ki 15:13; 18:19; 2 Ki 21:7; 23:4, 7; 2 Chr 15:16). The *asheroth*, or 'sacred poles', were her cultic symbol (cf. Jdg 3:7; 6:25-26; 2 Chr 24:18; Mi 5:14; Is 17:8; 27:9; Jr 17:2). Some scholars are of the opinion that the 'queen of heaven' to whom Jeremiah refers in chapter 17:8 and 44:15-25 is *Asherah* herself (Becking 2001:197-199).

As stated above, the lower ranking gods are always referred to as *'elōhîm* ('gods') or *benē 'elōhîm* ('sons of the gods/ children of the gods'). The gods *Baal*, *Yam*, *Anat* and *Astarte* belong to this group, as do the *sun* and the *moon*. Both these celestial bodies were regarded as gods and were often venerated by the Israelites.

It can no longer be claimed that Israel's religion was monotheistic from its inception. This idea has been invalidated by the discovery of the Ugaritic texts, the Khirbet el-Khōm and the Kuntillet 'Ajrūd inscriptions, as well as by critical study of biblical texts themselves (Dijkstra 2001a:17-44). A large number of Old Testament scholars are convinced that the religion of the ancient Israelites was similar to that of the other northwest Semitic peoples (Niehr 1995:71-72; Smith 2004:101-110). As already argued, the ancient Israelites were acquainted with a four tier pantheon, which can be represented as follows (Handy 1995:27-43; Smith 2004:110-114):

THE FOUR TIER *YAHWEH* PANTHEON

Yahweh and his Asherah
----
gods / children of the gods
----
other lower ranking gods
----
angels

The Old Testament books introduce readers to a strange world, and strange people with strange beliefs and customs. It is a triple decker world consisting of heaven, earth and the netherworld. The gods inhabited the top deck, while humans, animals and other creatures inhabited the middle deck. The netherworld, located beneath the earth, was inhabited by all sorts of mythological creatures who lived in the Waters of Chaos. They were called Rahab and Leviathan (Ps 74:14; 89:10; 104:26; Job 9:13; 26:12; 41:5; Is 51:9). The following is a pictorial representation of this worldview[v] (Cornelius 1994; Keel 2001):
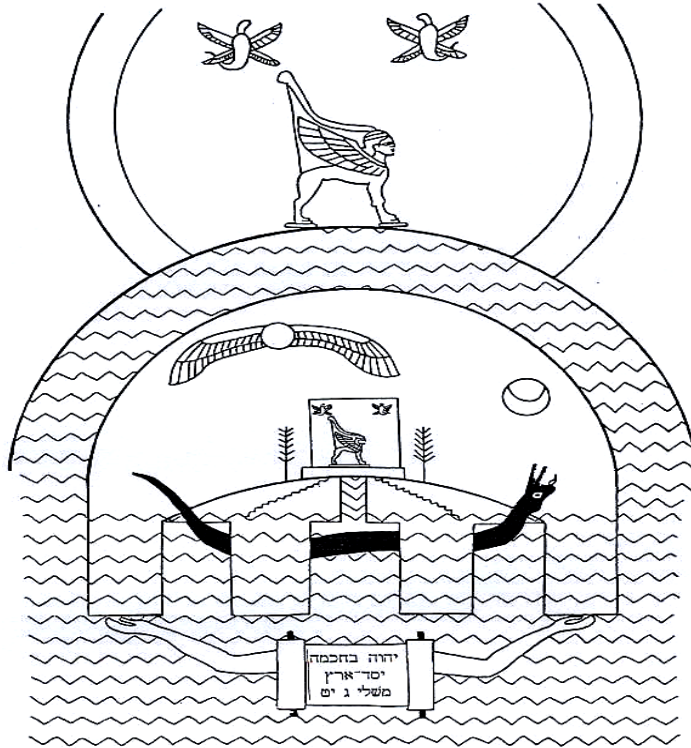
The illustration shows the triple decker cosmos: heaven, earth and the netherworld. *Leviathan* swims in the Waters of Chaos surrounding the 'pillars' on which the earth rests. *Yahweh's* throne on earth resembles the one in heaven and it rests on cherubim. Two seraphim (or snake gods) hover above the throne. The sun, which is also a god, has wings, enabling it to travel through the sky. The moon, a lesser god, is never depicted with wings. A river of living water flows from beneath the throne into the ocean, while the dome beneath heaven contains water that the supreme god is able to control. He might occasionally open the 'gates of heaven', bringing rain, snow or hail on earth (Job 38:22-23).

The diagram and the drawing are a very simplified representation of the triple decker cosmos and the four tier pantheon. A careful study of the biblical texts reveals that the idea of a four tier pantheon underwent changes with the passage of time, and the pantheon prior to the time of David looked different from the one that developed during and after the reigns of David and Solomon. In the pre-Davidic era, the god *El* was regarded as the supreme god. His consort was *Asherah*. There are sections in the Old Testament referring to Israel's god as *El,* while readers sometimes encounter the names *El-berit* and *El-Elyon*, both of which are associated with the god *El*. It is possible that some groups referred to their god as *El-Yahweh*. It is also possible that *Yahweh* was initially seen as a lower ranking god who later dethroned *El* to become the supreme god in the Israelite pantheon. From then onwards, the Israelites believed that *Yahweh* was the supreme god whose consort was called *Asherah*.

The information in this section may sound strange to those who are more familiar with orthodox Christianity and to those who call themselves 'biblical Christians'. But we should bear in mind what Robert Carroll (1991:2) maintained: "If reading the Bible does *not* raise profound problems for you as a modern reader, then check with your doctor and enquire about the symptoms of brain-death." A close reading of the Old Testament (especially in Hebrew) reflects the Israelite religion as more complex than the one Christians normally learn about in their catechism

courses. Moreover, the two 'versions' create problems for many an informed and learned Christian.[vi]

Early Judaism

The preceding section argued that the religion of Israel was not initially monotheistic, but, like any other northwest Semitic religion, was polytheistic. Moreover, the Israelites did not confine their worship to *Yahweh* but extended it to the other gods in their pantheon, including the goddess *Asherah*. At one stage of their history, there even existed two versions of this religion, *Yahwism* as understood and practised by the northern tribes (Israel), and *Yahwism* as understood and practised by the southern tribes (Judah).[vii] The northern version of *Yahwism* disappeared after the fall of the northern kingdom in 722 BCE, to be survived by that of the southern region. During their south-western campaign, the Assyrians, for whatever reason, did not destroy Jerusalem, the 'capital' of Judah, as they did Samaria, the 'capital' of Israel. Judah, or rather what was left of it after the conquests, became a vassal state of the Assyrian empire. It was during these years that *Yahwism* slowly developed into a monotheistic religion, in which two Judean kings, Hezekiah (715-687 BCE) and Josiah (640-609 BCE), played prominent roles (Smith 2004:60-61). These developments must be seen in relation to the history of the empires dominating the ancient Near East during these years. They are the Assyrian and the Babylonian empires.

The Assyrian empire reached its zenith during the reign of King Tiglath-pileser III (745-727 BCE). He expanded the empire westwards in order to conquer Egypt and incorporate it into his empire. He did not achieve this goal during his lifetime, but his successors, Shalmaneser V, Sargon II, Sennacherib and Esarhaddon, continued the policy of expansion. King Asshurbanapal (668-627 BCE) eventually succeeded in conquering Egypt. The two small kingdoms of Israel and Judah, particularly the former, were obstacles on their way to Egypt. The kings of Israel controlled the pathway through the mountains at Megiddo, and the Assyrian armies had to pass through this narrow gateway to reach Egypt. The Egyptian armies in turn had to travel through this gateway to reach the empires located in the vicinity of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers (cf. 2 Ki 23:29-30). As numerous battles were fought in the valley of Megiddo, the town and the hills surrounding it became a symbol of war. The name "Armageddon" is evidence of this fact ("Armageddon" = the mountain of Megiddo). According to the book of Revelation, the final battle on earth will be fought in this area (Rev 16:16).

The way in which groups in Israel and Judah interpreted the events occurring during their lifetime should also be noted. During the eighth century BCE, when the Assyrians became a dominant force, a group of prophets and writers in Israel (the northern kingdom) compiled a document in which they compared the relationship between *Yahweh* and Israel to a treaty or covenant (Nicholson 1967). Scholars called these groups of writers 'deuteronomists'. The document they compiled was in all probability an early edition of the book of Deuteronomy.

The deuteronomists got the idea of a treaty from the treaties made by the Assyrian kings with subjugated kings. They were usually called 'vassal treaties', because the Assyrian king was the 'great king', while those he subjugated were the 'vassal kings'. The deuteronomists took *Yahweh* to be the 'great king' and the Israelite kings and their subjects to be the 'vassals'. According to the deuteronomists, *Yahweh* agreed to protect Israel and to bless their actions, but they had to worship him alone. The deuteronomists could be said to have democratised the idea of a treaty, because *Yahweh* entered into an agreement with both the Israelite king and his subjects. The deuteronomists proclaimed that, if they adhered to the stipulations of the treaty, *Yahweh* would bless them. However, if they failed to do so, he would visit different types of curses on them (Dt 27-28).

It is understandable why the deuteronomists campaigned for the sole worship of *Yahweh*. If he was the 'great king' and had entered into an agreement with the Israelites, then they surely could not worship other gods. The deuteronomists' ideology became known in Judah (the southern kingdom) as well. Some scholars are of the opinion that the deuteronomists fled to Judah after the fall of the kingdom of Israel in 722 BCE, taking the document and their ideas with them (Nicholson 1967:83-106). These scholars refer, inter alia, to the reforms brought about in Judah by king Hezekiah during his reign (cf. 2 Ki 18:1-5). According to other scholars, the reforms were not based on the book of Deuteronomy and the ideas of the deuteronomists. On the contrary, they think king Hezekiah merely removed the treasures from the other temples in his kingdom and transferred them to the temple in Jerusalem to prevent the Assyrians from appropriating them. He did not close down the other temples, and the Judeans were still allowed to worship in them.

Scholars who maintain that the book of Deuteronomy played a role in the reforms of king Josiah (640-609 BCE) usually refer to the discovery in the temple of the 'the scroll of the law' during his reign. This story is told in 2 Kings 22:1-13. The 'scroll of the law' may not be the book of Deuteronomy as we know it today, but an earlier version or, better, an earlier edition of it.

At this stage, the Assyrian threat was something of the past, but the Babylonians were developing a dominant empire in the ancient Near East. The deuteronomists and prophets like Jeremiah tried to influence king Josiah to convince his subjects to worship only *Yahweh*. They cherished the hope that, if the Judeans agreed to this, *Yahweh* would protect the small kingdom of Judah against the threat of a Babylonian attack. Josiah followed their advice and *mono-yahwism* or *monolatry* became part of the Israelite religion. Bob Becking (2001:192) defines *monolatry* as follows: "'Monolatry' means that the existence and value of other gods are recognised but their veneration by the members of the community is dissuaded." *Yahwism* was now on its way to becoming a *monotheistic religion,* but the process was not yet complete. The four tier pantheon still existed, although the Judeans were now encouraged to worship only *Yahweh*. Some scholars refer to the group who encouraged the Judeans to do exactly this as the *Yahweh-alone* party (Smith 1987:24-30). They were probably active during the reign of king Josiah when the worship of *Asherah* was officially abolished (2 Ki 23:5-6).

The Babylonian conquest of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple in 586 BCE had a devastating effect on the Judeans. Their symbolic world collapsed. After the miraculous deliverance of Jerusalem during the siege of Sennacherib (2 Ki 18-19), the Judeans believed that no enemy would ever be able to conquer Jerusalem (Jr 7:4-8; 26:1-11). They could therefore not believe it when the armies of Nebuchadnezzar II, the Babylonian king, succeeded in conquering the city and destroying the temple. This was a traumatic experience that undermined their entire belief system. Those who survived began to question their faith tradition. The deuteronomists tried to supply answers and give an explanation. According to their understanding, the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, not to mention the exile, were *Yahweh's* punishment for the disloyalty of the Judeans. They did not worship *Yahweh* alone, nor did they adhere to the stipulations of the covenant. Referring to the Judeans' history, the deuteronomists gave examples of how they and their kings had turned their backs on the covenant. The effect was that the four tier pantheon 'imploded'. Only *Yahweh* and his *mal'ākîm* remained (Smith 2004:114-119).

It is of interest that the angels now received names, which had not been the case prior to the exile. However, when the two middle tiers of the four tier pantheon disappeared, the angels became important and assumed some of the tasks of the other lesser gods, which is why they received proper names. Consider, for example, the angels Gabriel and Michael (Dn 9:21; 10:21; 12:1). Clearly, under the influence of the deuteronomists, *Yahwism* became a proper monotheistic religion. The exilic and post-exilic *Yahwist* pantheon probably looked as follows (Handy 1995:42; Smith 2004:119):

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│    THE TWO TIER YAHWEH PANTHEON     │
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│                                     │
│               Yahweh                │
│     ------------------------------- │
│               angels                │
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This new pantheon is vividly presented in the message of Deutero-Isaiah (Is 40-55), who lived in exile in Babylon. In his oracles, he mocks the Babylonian gods, maintaining that they are man-made and totally impotent (Is 41:6-7; 44:6-20; 46:1-13). Time and again, he proclaims that *Yahweh* alone is the creator, the one responsible for what is happening in the world (Is 45:1-8). Here we have the start of *exclusivistic Yahwism*. The angels are acknowledged, but the existence of other gods is negated.

After the exile, *exclusivistic Yahwism* became the norm. Circumcision, observance of the sabbath, and the dietary laws became the identity markers of being a Jew during the exile and these continued to be important. *Yahwism* now developed into *early Judaism*, the religion practised by the Jews during the Persian period (539-333 BCE), the Hellenistic period (333-63 BCE), and the early years of the Roman period (63 BCE-100 CE).[viii]

Early Judaism soon developed different traditions. The fact that not all Judeans returned to their home country meant that both those who stayed behind and those who fled to Egypt had their own way of giving expression to their faith. Three traditions thus developed: (1) a Babylonian tradition; (2) an Egyptian tradition and (3) a Palestinian tradition. Although there was no normative Judaism, those living in the Diaspora maintained contact with their kin in Palestine. After the erection of the second temple in Jerusalem (520-515 BCE), Palestinian Judaism became the dominant tradition, while those who kept the other two traditions tried to maintain their ties with the high priest and his council in Jerusalem. This did not prevent the further development of groups and traditions in Judaism (Nickelsburg 2003:147-184).

According to Gabriele Boccaccini (2002), three traditions were dominant during the Persian era, which he calls "Sapiential Judaism, "Zadokite Judaism", and "Enochic Judaism". These three traditions are reflected in some of the writings originating during these years. Zadokite Judaism (a priestly tradition) is evident in the books of Ezekiel, Ezra-Nehemiah, the Priestly document of the Pentateuch and the books of Chronicles. Enochic Judaism is evident in sections of 1 Enoch. The Essenes, the Qumranites and some of the early Christians regarded 1 Enoch as an authoritative text. Sapiential Judaism is evident in the books of Proverbs, Job, Ecclesiastes and Jonah.

The three traditions did not exist in isolation but influenced one another. During the Hellenistic era (333-63 BCE) Sapiential Judaism not only became Hellenistic Judaism but also merged with Zadokite Judaism and spawned two other traditions: (1) Sadduceism, and (2) Pharisaism. Enochic Judaism, on the other hand, gave birth to Essenism. Four traditions of Judaism thus came into being during the Ptolomaic (312-200 BCE) and the Seleucid period (200-165 BCE). These are (1) Hellenistic Judaism, (2) Sadduceism, (3) Pharisaism, and (4) Essenism (Boccaccini 2002).

Early Christianity

Jesus and his followers practised *early Judaism* or *Second Temple Judaism,* as it is also called. They, too, were not acquainted with the doctrine of the 'Holy Trinity', so

did not worship a triune god. They adhered to the conviction that *Yahweh* was the only true god; that one should be circumcised as a sign of loyalty to the covenant; that one should celebrate the Sabbath, and adhere to the dietary laws.

Judean contact with the Persians and their religion, Zoroastrianism, which had a substantial influence on their own religious convictions, cannot be ignored. Jews started to accept the idea that two opposing forces existed in the cosmos. These two forces were associated with *Yahweh* and his opponent, Satan. The latter, however, was never regarded as being on a par with *Yahweh*.

One of the problems monotheism creates for believers is that of explaining evil. If there is only one god, then he should be responsible for both good and evil (Noort 1984). However, if the existence of more than one god is accepted, it becomes easier to deal with evil. Polytheism thus has a few advantages over monotheism, because the lower gods can be held responsible and blamed for evil in the world! This may explain why some of the practitioners of *early Judaism*, a monotheistic religion, found the idea of an evil force operating in the cosmos attractive.

One way of explaining the origin of this evil force was to postulate a rebellion amongst the angels in Yaweh's court. This idea developed in *Enochic Judaism*. It was believed that some angels did not accept the authority of *Yahweh* and rebelled against him. The narrative in Genesis 6:1-4 formed the basis for the new narrative, which developed over a lengthy period of time. It was eventually written down in 1 Enoch 1-36 (Nickelsburg & VanderKam 2004). According to these writers, there were both good and evil angels in heaven, the latter being responsible for all the bad things which happened on earth. This idea is also to be found in the writings of the Qumranites, while it was also cherished by some early Christian groups.

The Roman conquest of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple in 70 CE had a devastating effect on the beliefs of the Jewish people. For the second time in their history their most holy place, where they had worshipped, was destroyed. Once again, questions were raised about *Yahweh's* power and the continuation of the covenant with his people. Out of this melting-pot of events, and questions and answers, two religions developed: (1) *Rabbinic Judaism*, and (2) *early Christianity*. These religions did not materialise out of thin air, but evolved from the traditions that existed in *early Judaism* (Nickelsburg 2003). The early Christians were influenced by Hellenistic Judaism, Pharisaism and Essenism, while *early Rabbinic Judaism* was primarily the child of Pharisaism (Trocmé 1997:84).

Early Christianity = 'Biblical Christianity'?

It should be evident from this short presentation of the developments of Yahwism, Judaism and Christianity that nothing like 'biblical Christianity' had ever existed. This is a misnomer created in recent years by Christian fundamentalists, who read the Bible a-historically. Different events in history had an impact on the religion of Israel by contributing to changes in the adherents' convictions. The early Israelites cherished approximately the same ideas as the Canaanites. They were convinced that a four tier pantheon existed and that there were many gods in heaven. However, they called their supreme god not *El,* but *Yahweh*. Later on, after the destruction of Samaria in 722 BCE, *monolatry* became dominant in Judah because of the convictions and actions of the deuteronomists. *Monolatry* eventually led to *exclusivistic Yahwism*, a development that took shape after the destruction of the Solomonic temple in 586 BCE. The Babylonian exile contributed to the 'implosion' of the four tier *Yahweh* pantheon. Under the influence of prophets like Deutero-Isaiah, the exiled Judeans became convinced that the pantheon consisted of only two tiers. A *monolatric* form of *Yahwism* thus developed into a *monotheistic* form during the Second Temple period. This religion is now referred to as *early Judaism*, or *Second Temple Judaism*.

However, it was not long before different traditions developed in *early Judaism*. As stated earlier, the fall of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple in 70 CE had

a devastating effect on the religious beliefs of the Jews. It reminded them of the events of 586 BCE and, once again, they had to redefine their religious convictions. Soon after this event, Jewish leaders met in Javneh on the Palestinian coast to discuss the way forward. They had to both re-establish their identity as Jews and redefine their religious convictions. While this was happening, Christians and other deviant groups came to be regarded as heretical and were excluded from their synagogues. Christians were now separate and had to establish their own identity, which could not be accomplished without taking Second Temple Judaism, the 'mother religion', into account (Keel 1995). The events that eventually led to the development of *Rabbinic Judaism* and *early Christianity* can be presented as follows:

THE ORIGINS OF CHRISTIANITY

Rabbinic Judaism

586 BCE   70 CE

Yahwism → → → → → → → ‖ → Early Judaism → → → ‖
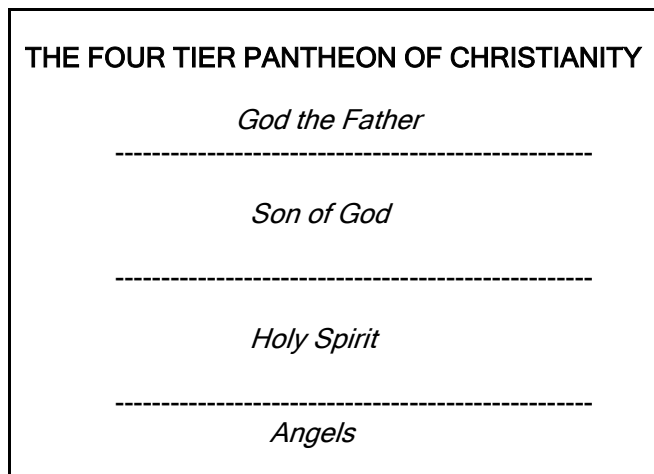
Early Christianity
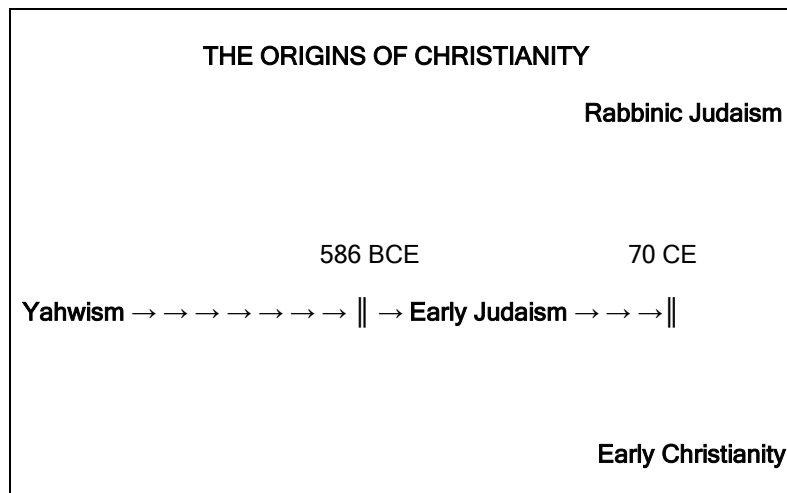
The birth of a grand narrative in Christianity

The early Christians were not a homogeneous group of believers. On the contrary, there were at least three groups (1) Jewish Christians, (2) Hellenistic Christians and (3) Pauline Christians (Trocmé 1997). The Jewish group did not survive for long, because they were excluded from the synagogues and were unable to convince the other Christians that Jewish identity was important for Christian identity. Paul and his convictions won the day. He argued that Jewish identity became null and void with the death of Jesus on the cross and that anyone who believed in Jesus' death and resurrection, and received the Holy Spirit, automatically became part of the 'new Israel'.

But differences continued to emerge amongst the early Christians. These differences can be linked to three dominant Christian centres in the second century: (1) Rome, (2) Alexandria (in Egypt), and (3) Syria (Luttikhuizen 2006:28-31). Christians living in these centres had different understandings of the life and message of Jesus, and they all struggled with the issue of Jesus' identity (Kennedy 2006:145). Was he merely a prophet, or was he more than that? If he was the son of God, did that mean he had existed throughout eternity, or did he become the son of God at his baptism?

The struggles came to an end during the reign of emperor Constantine (275-337CE). The differences amongst the Christians were undermining the stability of his empire, so he summoned the bishops to Nicea to establish clarity as to Jesus' identity and to settle the differences once and for all. He partially succeeded in uniting the different groups and contributed to the development of a unified creed (Dünzl 2007:49-59). Soon afterwards another emperor, Theodosius the Great (346-395 CE), made Christianity the state religion of the Roman Empire, forcing the idea of a 'Holy Trinity' and the observance of Sunday on his subjects. Christianity finally severed its ties with Jesus of Nazareth, the Galilean Jewish prophet. John Hunt (2004:220) hits

the nail on the head with his remark: "The Trinity just marks the point where Christianity stopped having much to do with the teaching of Jesus and modelled itself on contemporary pagan religion." A pantheon developed in Christianity which may be presented as follows:[ix]

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┌─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│                                                         │
│   THE FOUR TIER PANTHEON OF CHRISTIANITY                │
│                                                         │
│                  God the Father                         │
│   ----------------------------------------------------  │
│                                                         │
│                   Son of God                            │
│                                                         │
│   ----------------------------------------------------  │
│                                                         │
│                   Holy Spirit                           │
│                                                         │
│   ----------------------------------------------------  │
│                    Angels                               │
│                                                         │
└─────────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
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Another important person who lived during those years and contributed enormously to the development of Christianity was the theologian Augustine (354-430 CE). He introduced the notion of a cosmic fall at the beginning of creation and defended it vehemently against the views of Pelagius and Julian of Eclanum. They argued that children do not inherit a 'tainted nature' from their parents, but each individual sins on his/her own account. The emperor supported Augustine and banned Pelagius from Rome (Freeman 2003:283-299). The fall of Rome (410 CE), the main centre of Christianity at that stage, had a further impact on Augustine's thoughts and theology. One of his major theological works, *The city of God* (*De civitate Dei*), was written in response to these events. His theological views led to the development of a new paradigm in Christianity, which can be summarised as: fall-redemption-judgement. The paradigm received state support and has dominated Western Christianity ever since. Christianity in its Western garb is nothing other than the 'state religion of the Roman Empire'. The Protestant Reformers of the sixteenth century were unable to extricate their thinking from this paradigm. On the contrary, they merely rekindled it (Wiersinga 1992:42). However, the paradigm has reached the end of its lifecycle. The 'demolition' of the ancient worldview, the introduction of evolutionary biology, the concept of the 'big bang' and the paradigm shift in the study of the Bible have all had devastating effects on the traditional doctrines of Christianity. Philip Kennedy (2006:252) correctly states: "As Christianity begins its twenty-first century, its Augustinian paradigm of theology has met the fate of the Berlin Wall." However, a great many theologians choose to ignore this, and continue with their discussions as if nothing has changed.

Conclusion

Christianity in its Augustinian garb is unable to engage in a proper dialogue with modern science, as its doctrines are intertwined with the triple decker universe of antiquity and its outdated understanding of the world and the place of human beings in it. Don Cupitt (2001:95) goes straight to the point in his book *Reforming Christianity* with the following question and answer:

> Why? And how is it that, in Christianity in particular, the Church ended up with its heart outside history altogether and lost in the world of myth? The answer lies in the Grand Narrative of cosmic fall and redemption which Christianity developed and to which it remains firmly attached.

If Christianity is to be of any value for people living in the twenty-first century, it will have to break with the Augustinian paradigm and its outdated worldview. Moreover, theologians can engage in a proper dialogue with science only if they study Christianity historically and accept that human beings cannot formulate eternal religious truths. Theologians have to develop a sense of the historical, or, as some scholars would call it, 'a historical consciousness'. Without a historical consciousness, Charles Darwin (1809–1882) would have been unable to understand the evidence he was collecting while travelling on the Beagle. Without such a consciousness, theologians will continue to claim a status for the Bible that contradicts the evidence of its origin and growth. They will continue to claim a status for Christian doctrines that contradicts the evidence that these doctrines were formulated by humans and enforced by emperors. Then, and only then, will Christians be taken seriously by their colleagues in the natural sciences, opening the way for proper dialogue between the Christian religion and the natural sciences.

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Endnotes

1 Other Christianities are 'confessional Christianity', 'liberal Christianity', 'liberation Christianity' and 'feminist Christianity', to name but a few.

2 All biblical quotations are taken from the *Revised English Bible with Apocrypha* (1989).

3 Genesis 18 will be referred to later in the discussion of the four tier pantheon. These visitors were 'angels', or messengers of the supreme god.

4 At first an angel of the LORD spoke to Moses (Ex 3:2), but later Yahweh himself spoke to him (Ex 3:4-6). The difference may reflect a reworking of the original tradition that Yahweh himself had called Moses.

5 Professor Sakkie Cornelius of the University of Stellenbosch granted the author permission to use the drawing. It was first published in the *Journal for Northwest Semitic Languages* 20 (1994).

6 Mark Smith (2004:160) puts it as follows: "The study of Israel's religion and theological reflections on the Bible do not often mix well."

7 It is interesting that one of the Kuntillet 'Ajrūd inscriptions refers to *Yahweh of Samaria* (Smelik 2006:177).

8 The name 'Jew' or 'Jewish people' became current during the Persian period. Scholars normally use the names 'Judeans' and 'Israelites' when referring to the pre-exilic period. The name 'Jew' thus refers to the Judeans who went into exile and later returned to their country of origin. It is still the dominant name for people who regard themselves as descendants of the ancient Israelites.

9 As yet, there is no goddess, but, within a few centuries Mary was to become '*theotokos*' (Mother of God) and 'co-redemptrix' (co-redeemer).