



The Evolution of Israel's Religion from Abraham to Pre-Exilic and Its Significance for Christians

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Abstract

This article examines the evolution of Israel's religion from the Abrahamic Pre-exilic (approx. 2100-586 BC). The main data of this research is a literature study with a qualitative methodology through an Integrative Critical Analysis (ICA) approach to achieving the aims or objectives of the research. The conclusion or research results obtained are that the evolution of Israel's religion occurred not only in an applicative manner but also substantively. The evolution of Israel's religion can be said to be inseparable from the population, natural, socio-political, marriage, or family factors, where religion is the ultimate concern for survival, aligning life with the universe (aligning one's self with the universe), appeasing the gods including Baal, Asherah, Molok, and others to get their favor (how to placate the deities and secure their favor) with the background of the principle that obedience can be a blessing and disobedience can be a curse. Its significance for Christians is that Israel's religion and Christianity have historical and theological links to deepen understanding of the Bible; as a mirror of faith and Christian life; and how Christians should practice their religion in a pluralist society and the midst of pluralism.

Keywords: Abraham; Christian; Evolution; Pre-exilic; Religion of Israel.

Abstrak

Artikel ini membahas tentang evolusi agama Israel dari Abraham- *Pre-exilic* (kira-kira 2100-586 SM). Data utama penelitian ini ialah studi pustaka dengan metodologi kualitatif melalui pendekatan *Integrative Critical Analysis* (ICA) untuk mencapai maksud atau tujuan penelitian. Kesimpulan atau hasil penelitian yang diperoleh ialah evolusi agama Israel terjadi bukan hanya secara aplikatif tetapi juga substantif. Evolusi agama Israel terjadi dapat dikatakan tidak terlepas dari faktor populasi, alam, sosial politik, pernikahan atau keluarga, dimana agama sebagai *ultimate concern* untuk bertahan hidup (*survival*), menyalurkan kehidupan dengan alam semesta (*aligning one's self with the universe*), menenteramkan para dewa diantaranya Baal, Asyera, Molok, dan lainnya untuk mendapatkan kemudahannya (*how to placate the deities and secure their favor*) dengan latar belakang prinsip kalau taat dapat berkat dan tidak taat dapat kutuk. Signifikansinya bagi umat Kristiani dimana agama Israel dan kekristenan memiliki hubungan historis dan teologis untuk memperdalam pemahaman Alkitab; sebagai cermin iman dan kehidupan Kristiani; dan bagaimana seharusnya umat Kristiani mengamalkan agamanya dalam masyarakat pluralis dan di tengah pluralisme.

Kata Kunci: Abraham; Kristen; evolusi; *Pre-exilic*; Agama Israel.

INTRODUCTION

Israel's religion has evolved (Hill & Walton, 1996). The evolution that occurred is a natural change resulting from a process of adaptation. Evolution occurs not simply in biological terms, but also in terms of cosmology and culture (Delio, 2008). Taufik underlined that regardless of whether the term evolution is applied to culture or religion, the axiology must be addressed (Muhammad Taufik, 2019). Evolution in culture or religion has been discussed previously by James George Frazer in *The Golden Bough* (Muqtada, 2016). Religion can be viewed from two perspectives: the divine perspective and the human perspective. From the divine perspective, God reveals the truth in religion; from the human one, mankind discovered it. From the divine perspective, revelation is progressive; from the human perspective, religion might be

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Received: April 06, 2022; Revised: December 12, 2022; Accepted: December 29, 2022

described as evolved (Barton, 1912c). Religion is viewed from a human perspective and understood as a human response to God's revelation (Coburn, 1996; Veitch, 1971); the system of faith and rules of relationship between humans and humans and humans and the environment (Boettcher, 2022; Dien, 1997; Körtner, 2022); and belief, the attitude of worship or worship of the divine (the service and worship of the divine or supernatural through a system of attitudes, beliefs, and practices) (Hess, 2007). Israel's religion focuses on the Israelites' beliefs, attitudes, devotion, or worship of the Divine (Hess, 2007).

George Aaron Barton examined the evolution of Israel's religion during the time of Moses (Barton, 1912c), during the time of the prophets, especially the prophets Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, and Mikah (Barton, 1912a), during the time of Jeremiah and Nehemiah, and up until the time of Christ (Barton, 1912b). Ramona Wanlass, who raised the issue of Israeli polytheism and Yahwism (Wanlas, 2011), Marthin Steven Lumingkewas, who discussed Israel's religious transformations during the Israeli monarchy (Lumingkewas, 2020), and Francis Irwan Widjaja, who examined the evolution of Israel religion in the context of Christian worship during the Covid-19 pandemic, have all contributed to this discussion (Widjaja, Boiliu, Prasetya, Simanjuntak, & Paat, 2021). This study covers the evolution of Israel's religion from Abraham through pre-exilic/before the exile to Babylon in substantive and applicable terms, as well as the primary causal elements for the evolution of Israel's religion during this time period (approximately 2100-586 BC).

The purpose of the study of the evolution of Israel's religion from the time of Abraham to the pre-exilic period is to provide an overview of Israel's religious changes and their underlying causes. This research is important because it is expected that the results will provide or enhance Christian insights in studying the Old Testament Bible, particularly in regard to Israel's religion, and can serve as a learning tool for Christians living in a diverse community.

RESEARCH METHOD

The primary basis for this study is archaeological materials on Israel's religion throughout the period of the Old Testament, with the Bible serving as the primary foundation and framework. As a discussion basis, the Old Testament Bible, particularly the narratives of the Israelites' beliefs, attitudes, worship, and practical acts toward Yahweh and other gods in Canaan. This study was conducted utilizing the Integrative Critical Analysis (ICA) methodology for a literature review. ICA is used to describe the overall overview of the literature; to conduct a literature review to develop a case; and to uncover the central message of what is hidden in the literature (Gilbert, Johnson, & Lewis W., 2018). In discussions, the ICA method is utilized to reach research objectives. As for the entire process of investigation and discussion from the standpoint and creation of Christian theology. A description of the evolution of Israel's religion from Abraham to the period before the Babylonian exile is constructed by analyzing archaeological literature and biblical tales using the ICA method.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

From Abraham until the pre-exilic period or before the Babylonian exile (about 2100-586 B.C.), the religion of Israel underwent an evolution. Not only was the evolution of Israel's religion applicative, but it was also substantively. Archaeological literature, particularly Old Testament biblical archaeology, reveals the evolution of Israel's religion. The following is a series of evolutions that occurred in Israel's religion and the factors that caused it.

Family Religion Became National Religion

The religion of Israel is a family religion that has evolved into a national religion. Family religion can be a religion that originates in a family or the practice of worship inside a family, whereas the intended national religion is a religion that has been acknowledged or embraced by a nation (Rowley, 2004). Israel's religion originated with a group of Abraham's relatives (Gen. 12:4-5). God summoned Abram (Abraham) from the Ur-Chaldean region of Mesopotamia to the country of Canaan. Abraham, along with his wife and nephew Lot, set off for the land of Canaan (Gen. 12:1-9). Abraham had a son named Isaac, who later had a son named Jacob. The union between Jacob and his two wives and two concubines resulted in the birth of twelve children who would eventually become the twelve tribes of Israel. Moreover, in the Israelite religion, God's name is referred to as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in order to separate Him from the gods of Canaan and to allude to the same individual who later announces Himself as Yahweh. (Ex. 3:15) (Armstrong, 2019). In response to the famine, Jacob and his family of over 70 people relocated to Egypt, where Joseph, one of Jacob's sons, already resided (Ex. 1:5). The number of Israelites living in Egypt rose, which alarmed Pharaoh's reign. In response, Pharaoh ordered the destruction of sons born to Israeli mothers, and the Israelites were also subjected to forced labor. Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, who were called by God, led the Israelites out of Egypt. After 430 years in Egypt, Israel managed to escape (Ex. 12: 40-41) with a total of approximately 603,550 men aged 20 and older and able to fight (Num. 1: 46-49, Ex. 12: 37). This number does not include women, children, or the tribe of Levi. Including women, children, and the tribe of Levi, there were between one and two million Israelites who left Egypt.

Ken M. Campbell and Karel van der Toorn explained that the ancient Israelite social order consisted of several layers: *'am* (people), *sebet matteh* (tribe), *mispha* (clan), and *bet 'ab* (house of a father) in relation to Israeli religion, which originated from family religion or is referred to as family religion (Campbell, 2003). The *bet'ab* family unit can refer to a nuclear family consisting of a husband, wife, and children with a total of six to seven individuals, or it can refer to a large family with three to four offspring and approximately fifty members (van der Toorn, 1996). The transformation of Israel's religion from a family religion to national religion was a result of the country's population growth from 70 to nearly 2 million people. The occurrence of the Exodus is significant not only historically, but also theologically because it confirms Israel's religious identity. Hess (Hess, 2007) asserted, "the story of the exodus, which appears repeatedly in Israel's scriptures, constitutes the most significant act of historical redemption that contributed uniquely to the religious identity of this nation." The transition of Israel's religion from family religion to national religion was exemplified by the provision of the Torah legislation given by God to the Israelites, and this Torah applies to all Israelites in terms of what they must do or how they must live as God's or Yahweh's people (Ex. 20; Deut. 4-5). The God-given Torah law was frequently reinforced to be respected and faithfully carried out by the entire Israelite people when they reached the land of Canaan, and the same Torah was reaffirmed by Ezra following Israel's return from exile (post-exilic).

Priest's Office from Head of Family to Elected Tribe

The evolution of Israel's religion is reflected in the priesthood. In the Israelite faith, the priest is the religious ceremony's leader. During the period of the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob), the priest was the head of the family. However, throughout the time of Moses and during the monarchy, the position of the priest was given to the tribe of Levi or to another tribe. Hess stressed that during Abraham's day, the religion of Israel did not have a prophet or priest; rather, the family patriarch served as a priest. According to Hess (Hess, 2007), "the religion lacks prophets and priests". One may say that priests are the heads of their families. Then Aaron Chalmers emphasized that the Israeli religious priesthood system (priests in

ancient Israel) shifted to the Levites, who were devoted to holding the priesthood, and that in addition to the Levites, other tribes were also appointed to serve as priests, particularly Israeli men who were deemed capable. As a man named Micah ordained his son to be a priest from the tribe of Ephraim during the period of the judges (Judg. 17:5). In addition, the sons of David from the tribe of Judah were appointed as priests (2 Sam. 8:18), and Ira the Jair was designated priest of David (2 Sam) (Chalmers, 2012).

Oral Religion Developed into Written Religion

Written religion evolved from oral religion. During the period of the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob), the religion of Israel was an oral religion. During the time of Moses, however, the religion of Israel was written, notably on stone tablets or in the Torah. According to Hess (Hess, 2007), "the content of the Decalogue formed an essential part of Israelite beliefs at the time of their composition, and this implies a long-standing constituent of central beliefs of their religion." Walter Brueggemann underlined that the writing of the 10 commandments of God or the Torah became the cornerstone of devotion in the Israelite religion when the ten commandments were written down (Brueggemann, 2005). Until the post-exilic period, the ten commandments of God or the Torah served as the primary basis for Israel's worship; even today, the Torah remains the most important thing in Judaism and Christianity, despite the fact that the Torah does not appear to be explicitly emphasized in the worship system. However, what is written in the Torah cannot be ignored in the church.

Places of Worship from Tent to Temple

Originally, the tabernacle of meeting was the specific place for Israelites to worship God; the temple was not the focal point of the Israelite religion. After that, the Temple of God became vital to the religion of Israel, particularly during the Age of Monarchy. In the time of the patriarchs (Abraham), the Jerusalem Temple was not yet an important religious site for Israel. Hess (Hess, 2007) stated, "Jerusalem played no significant role". During the monarchy, particularly during Solomon's reign, the temple in Jerusalem became the main focus of Israel's religious activity. Miller emphasized that when there was a temple, the temple became the center of Israel's religious life (Miller, 2000), and the majority of the priests [during the monarchy] were in the Jerusalem temple, and they conducted religious ceremonies in holy places such as Shikem, Bethel, Beersheba, Gilgal, Silo, Mizpah, Gibeon, Oprah, and Dan (Chalmers, 2012). Torah teaching migrated from the home to the temple of God, where priests taught it (Chalmers, 2012).

Elohim and Yahweh

In Abraham's time, the known God was Elohim, but in Moses' time, God revealed himself as Yahweh. David F. Hinson stressed that Abraham was unaware of the name Yahweh; rather, the patriarch recognized God by the name *El-Syddai* (Hinson, 1991). The change in God's name was not solely because *El* was the term ancient Southwest Asians used to refer to God (Hinson, 1991). *El* is also the name of the ancient Semitic god (Rowley, 2004); nonetheless, the name Yahweh reveals the nature of the Israelite god (Vriezen, 2009).

Elohim is mentioned 2500 times in the Old Testament Bible (Vriezen, 2009); Elohim, which is still related to the name *El*, is recognized as the king of gods in the land of Canaan (Dearman, 2000). El then proclaims himself to be: (1) *El-Sydday* refers to a mountain in the West Semitic region that is associated with a woman's breast. *El-Shadday*, who is associated with the forces of nature, not only introduces himself to Abraham, but also to Jacob, and in Jacob's blessing in Genesis 49:25, there is a blessing from heaven as

well as a blessing of breasts and womb. (2) *El-Elyon* translates to God Most High. (3) *El-Olam*, in Hebrew *'ālām*, denotes eternity; hence, the meaning of the name God in this context is *El* the Eternal. (4) *El-Bethel*, which signifies *El*'s dwelling or temple. This sentence plainly identifies *El* as the God of Israel's ancestors: (5) *El Elohay-Israel*, this phrase clearly shows *El* as the God of Israel's ancestors. (6) *El-Roi* is *El* who sees. These are expressions from *El*'s revelation, and Elohim appears in Genesis 1 and 1:26, where God declares, "Let Us create man in Our image and likeness" (Dever, 2005).

Yahweh is the highest of all gods. Yahweh is mentioned 6,800 times in the Old Testament (Vriezen, 2009), and in Exodus 3, when God introduces Himself to Moses, the name Yahweh becomes central. The RSV rendering "*I Am Who I Am or I Will Be What I Will Be*" is ambiguous; nonetheless, Exodus 3:16 identifies this name with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Dever, 2005). Dearman underlined that when God revealed himself to Moses as Yahweh, he was referring to "*the God of the ancestors, is sending Moses to the Israelites and that Yahweh will be God's name throughout all generations*" (Dearman, 2000). God revealed himself to Moses as Yahweh not only to introduce himself, but also in the context of God sending Moses back to Egypt to lead Israel out of Egypt, and Yahweh will be God's name for the next generation of Israel. Moses would respond with the name Yahweh when the Israelites inquired about the identity of God. Hess noted that the term Yahweh became prominent through the exodus event, giving the religion of Israel a new identity (Hess, 2007, p. 154). Yahweh is distinguished from the gods or *el* in Canaan (Smith, 2015).

Monotheism Religion, Syncretism Practice

Israel's religion is monotheistic; only God should be worshipped and believed in. The unambiguous monotheism of this Israelite religion is expressed in the Torah that Moses received (Ex 20: 1-5). However, in the Israelites' worship traditions, particularly following Moses and Joshua (about 1400–586 B.C.), syncretism emerged. Vriezen underlined that for centuries throughout Israel's history, Israelite religion was practiced in historic temples throughout the land, but that these temples had become progressively syncretic. There were numerous syncretistic versions of Yahwism at various times and locations inside the temples, depending on the political environment (Vriezen, 2009). The Israelites embrace syncretism in their religion; in addition to God, they also worship statues of swine, Baal, Asherah, and the celestial army, among others (Collins, 2005). Dever stressed that the existence of gods, particularly in the practice of the Israelite religion, transformed the Israelite religion into syncretism, or the fusion of different faiths and belief systems (Dever, 2005). Miller's remark that Yahweh opposes existing gods is also indicative of syncretism in Israelite religion; for instance, Psalm 82 is a poetry that conveys resistance to gods, the fall of the Philistine god Dagon (1 Sam 4-6), and Elijah's opposition to the prophet Baal at Horeb (1 Kings 18-19) (Miller, 2000). The most obvious evidence from the text of the Bible is 2 Kings 23 when Josiah reformed Israel's religion and found various kinds of idols in God's temple in Jerusalem.

Factors Contributing to Israel's Religion's Evolution

The evolution of Israel's religion from the time of Abraham until before the Babylonian exile was due to natural, social, political, and marriage/family elements, and where religion was the ultimate or primary concern (Dever, 2005). Religion, according to Dever, is an ultimate concern: first, to survive. Survival is not an instinct like that of animals, but rather the physical and mental resistance to disease and danger. Second, aligning one's self with the universe. In ancient times, life itself became a religion that cannot be separated as it is today into the sacred and the secular. Third, how to placate the deities and secure their favor. At that time, there were no rational or irrational concepts; what mattered most was that

the gods were not angered by rituals or sacrifices. Dever emphasized that the concept of ancient religion must be differentiated from the modern era. The concept of religion now is good, comfortable, beautiful, and spiritual, while the concept of religion in ancient times, as said by an anthropologist Eilberg-Schwartz (1990), namely messy, bloodthirsty, dead and alive, thus it is very important how their attitude towards the gods and gods must be fed or served (Dever, 2005).

The evolution of Israel's religion was also influenced by or caused by marriages between the people of Israel and residents around Canaan and others. Miller emphasized that this syncretistic Yahwism allegedly entered the life of the Israelites through marriages between Israelis and non-Israelites or foreign nations, particularly during the monarchy period; for instance, Solomon married a number of foreign women, resulting in a mixture of beliefs (Miller, 2000). During the reign of Ahab, the Israelites worshiped Baal via Jezebel, who was challenged by Elijah on Mount Carmel. Israel's marriages with the natives of Canaan occurred not only at the highest or regal level but also among the common people.

There are various sociopolitical considerations in addition to the marital issue. Due to the political element between Israel and its neighbors, Solomon had several wives (Miller, 2000). Social politics became one of the reasons for evolution, similar to what Jeroboam did when he built a golden calf statue and relocated the center of worship from Jerusalem to Bethel and Dan following the split monarchy that separated Israel into north and south. Jeroboam maintained the ten tribes that had divided and joined him, known as the northern kingdom and the two tribes that had not joined him, known as the southern kingdom, through religious politics. The evolution of Israel's religion was unavoidable due to marriage and political considerations (Miller, 2000).

The Evolution of Israel's Religion and Its Significance for Christians

The historical and theological connection between the religion of Israel and Christianity makes the evolution of the religion of Israel important for Christians. The importance of understanding the development of the religion of Israel is to support the deepening of the Bible; as a mirror to the faith and life of Christianity; and how Christians should practice their religion amid a pluralist Indonesian society and pluralism.

The historical link between Christianity and Israel's religion, *Christian* means the people or followers of Christ (Guthrie & Al., 1988, p. 377) where Christ (Jesus Christ) himself who is the central figure in Christianity was born from Israel (Bruce, 1987, p. 31). Christ was not only born in the area of Israel, but also a descendant of Israel. The birth of Jesus, who is called Christ, was not a coincidence, but had been prophesied by the prophets who were in Israel before his birth (Isa. 7:14 cf. Matt. 1:23) (J. H. Bavinck, 1986, p. 37), and the Bible witnesses it is clear that Christ is from the seed of Abraham, namely the ancestor of Israel (Matt. 1:1). Theologically, Christianity and the religion of Israel have something in common, Christianity is a descendant of Judaism (Tenney, 1993, p. 101), although today Christianity is different from Judaism. Christianity and the Israelite religion have the same name for God even in different languages. The name of God in Christianity has similarities in Israelite religion, including: "El" or "Elohim" translated "God" that is God; "Adonai" is translated "Lord" that is "Lord or lord"; and "Yahweh" (YHWH) translated "Jehovah" (ASV) in Indonesian translated "LORD" (Enns, 2012, p. 214). Another theological similarity is that the religious figures of Israel in the Old Testament (PL) were retold in Christianity both by Jesus and by the apostles (Matt. 6:29; 12:39; Acts 3:13; 7:2; Heb. 11:1-40). In terms of the scriptures between Israel's religion and Christianity, even though Israel's religion does not recognize the New Testament (NT), the OT is recognized by Christians as a prophecy about Christ in the NT, and the NT or Christ fulfills the OT (Feinberg, 1996, p. 14).

The evolution of Israel's religion is important as a mirror of faith for Christians in Indonesia who live in the midst of pluralism. Indonesia is a unitary state where there are many religions and beliefs or pluralism (Suwignyo, 2019, p. 20), for this reason it is important for Christians living in Indonesia to pay attention to the evolution of Israel's religion as a lesson, especially as a monotheistic religion. In the Christian faith, the teachings and practices of monotheism are important and primary (Ex. 20:3; Deut. 5:6-7), and the main concept of sin in the Christian faith is not just a matter of morality but a matter of God's law (H. Bavinck, 2006, p. 130), or human rejection of God (Rom. 1:18-23) (Frame, 2013, p. 875). In addition, the cause of evolution is an important matter for Christians to pay attention to. Israel's religion underwent an evolution due to population growth, marriage, social, and political. This should be a record for Christians, that biologically increasing Christians is not enough but needs to be balanced with an understanding of Biblical Christian norms, especially regarding the person of God himself, religion, matters of marriage, social life, and politics, and so on where topics these can be discussed separately.

The evolution of Israel's religion is important for Christians where Christians should practice their faith and religion in a pluralistic society and pluralism. The practice of religion as the main thing (ultimate concern) for survival in a pluralistic society or pluralism is unavoidable. However, practices that are contrary to the beliefs or teachings of the scriptures will bring problems in to the Christian faith. Even though Christianity is not pluralism, Christians must still maintain and appreciate the pluralism of Indonesian society with respect and love for others (Suwignyo, 2019). Christianity teaches the main thing and how to treat fellow human beings not only as human beings created by God but as oneself through love (Matt. 22: 37-40), like Christ who loves all humans.

CONCLUSION

From Abraham until pre-exilic (2100-586 BC), the religion of Israel evolved. The evolution of Israel's religion occurred not only in an applicative manner but also substantively. The facts described in archaeological literature and the Old Testament Bible demonstrate the evolution of Israel's religion. Israelite religion evolved as follows: the family religion became the national religion; the priesthood of the family head was transferred to the chosen tribe; oral religion evolved into a written religion; the place of worship shifted from the home or tent to the temple of God; Elohim-Yahweh; and monotheism-syncretism. The evolution of Israel's religion was influenced by a variety of environmental, sociopolitical, marital, and familial elements. Religion at that period was ultimate concern with surviving, aligning oneself with the universe, and appeasing the gods of Canaan to obtain their favor, with the setting that obedience is a blessing and disobedience is a curse (cf. Deut. 11: 26, 28).

The importance of the evolution of Israel's religion for Christianity in Indonesia is due to the historical and theological relationship between the two, for its significance is to deepen understanding of the Bible; as a mirror of faith and Christian life; and how Christians should practice their religion in a pluralistic society and the midst of pluralism.

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