

# Section 9 – Patriarchal Monotheism

---

## Isolation and Invasion

The kind of deeply conservative, rule-bound culture that existed in Judah depends on something that is not always within the power of its controllers to ensure: isolation. No matter where the extremes of religious conservatism flourish, their greatest enemy is contact with the outside world. This is true in extremist Islamic states today; it is true in the pulpit-thumping darkness of America's 'Bible Belt' as well.

Isolation is the one thing that Judah could not have. It straddles the only viable route from the Near East into Egypt, an important strategic position both in military and trading terms. It was inevitable that the great powers, keen to protect their interests in the region, would want to ensure that it was pacified or brought to heel. Assyrians, Egyptians, Babylonians and Greeks had all taken their turn, and by the end of the first century BCE the Romans were in control.

The Romans were polytheists with many gods and goddesses. Their women, though by no means unaffected by the general suppression of women throughout the warrior patriarchy, were nevertheless seen in public, could own property and were treated with respect. Roman slaves were better treated, by and large, than Jewish women of the era. If slaves became free, they could set up businesses in their own right and their children, born free, would be full citizens. All in all, Roman life must have appeared extremely desirable to the average Jewish woman of the day.

Rome was a melting-pot, a magpie that assimilated ideas from every culture it touched, even if those cultures were crushed under its military boot. All the deities of the Greek pantheon, with suitably Romanised names, were present, alongside a host of others from North Africa, Phrygia, Germania and Gaul. Roman religion was replete with aspects of the Goddess.

For the Jews, the fanatical and exclusive worship of one god, Jahweh, was the only route to redemption. In return for such devotion, Jahweh would not only reward them with the return of the Promised Land and the right to live there in peace and freedom, but also destroy all those who did not accept him as the only god – the polytheists, in other words.

But manifest polytheism had not led to Rome's downfall at the hand of a raging desert monster; rather the opposite. Rome was in robust health and in control of Judah, where it showed little respect for Jewish customs. Pontius Pilate even had statues of Roman deities placed in the

Temple, to the outrage of the Jews. Despite all the slights and blasphemies, no divine retribution was taken.

As might be expected, the priesthood was appalled by the presence of 'false gods' amongst them. They had railed against the Babylonian deities but as exiles they had little choice. The Romans were in their land, demanding taxes of them and using that money in the furtherance of idolatry and polytheism, as was evident from the temples they built to what the Jahwists considered 'abominations'. The frustration was intense.

Patriarchal social conservatism, then as now, is not a level playing field. At its heart is discrimination. It strongly favours the hereditary elite against the most disadvantaged in society. In first century Judea, the two most obviously disadvantaged classes were the rural poor and women. The version of Judaism then promulgated had little succour for them. Jahweh was a bitter, angry, vengeful god whose only interest was in being worshipped. His cult had no conception of forgiveness; the slightest lapse in observance of the Deuteronomic Laws would be punished by temporal disaster. 'Abide by the letter of the law or be punished, and if you are being punished it is because you did not abide by the law.' People had to obey laws drawn up in the name of an appalling god because they were browbeaten into terror by a class of priests who reaped the temporal rewards as their influence grew.

And yet, before the people's very eyes were others who did not fear Jahweh and mocked him with impunity. The Romans were successful, wealthy, had good lives and held the keys to the Promised Land. This had a profound effect.