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Bezalel ben Uri and the Impotence of Foreign Deities

“See, YHWH has called by name Bezalel, the son of Uri.” (Exodus 35:30) Who is Bezalel and why is he chosen as the architect and artisan of the Tabernacle?

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*Bezalel, as in Exodus 31*, James Tissot, c. 1896-1902 (extended). Wikimedia

Bezalel’s Special Attributes

In Exodus 35–36, we encounter one of the Torah’s most enigmatic characters: Bezalel, the artisan and architect who oversees the building of the Tabernacle. Bezalel is described as endowed with divine spirit and technical know-how:

שמות לה:לא וַיְמַלֵּא אֹתוֹ רוּחַ אֱלֹהִים בְּחׇכְמָה בִּתְבוּנָה וּבְדַעַת וּבְכׇל־מְלָאכָה.

Exod 35:31 and he filled him with a divine spirit, wisdom, discernment, and knowledge in every kind of craft.

The product that Bezalel makes further highlights his special characteristics. As the constructor of the Tabernacle, a dwelling place for YHWH, Bezalel builds a house that is unique from all other human-built houses. Scholars stress the superlative nature of the Book of Exodus’s description of him: Bezalel has “the gift of originality” and he possesses “all the requisite qualities [of wisdom, discernment and knowledge] in supernatural measure.”[1]

There is indeed something “supernatural” about Bezalel, and the unique and surpassing description of this character provokes compelling questions: Who is Bezalel? Why does Exodus describe him in this manner? And what is his relationship with God?

Human Creativity in the Bible

Within the Bible, creativity is frequently a realm in which God is in conflict with humans. In biblical texts, humans are denied originality. Knowledge that is generated independently by the human mind, and not installed there by God, “must be at best wrong, at worst possibly antagonistic to God.”[2] The Bible also expresses suspicion regarding human artisanship, particularly metalworking, which often leads to the construction of idols.[3]

Bezalel, designated as both a metal worker (Exod. 36:32) and as a thinker “of thoughts or plans” (Exod. 36:35) would seem to embody the “creative tensions” that concern the writers of the Bible. And yet, the description of Bezalel in Exodus 35–36is not infused with tension; rather, he is presented as an elevated, masterful artisan, skilled in a variety of creative processes, and capable of instructing others.[4]

YHWH’s Relationship with Bezalel

The absence of tension between God and this particular artisan highlights the special character of their relationship, which is further indicated by the opening verse of the description:

שמות לה:ל וַיֹּ֤אמֶר מֹשֶׁה֙ אֶל־בְּנֵ֣י יִשְׂרָאֵ֔ל רְא֛וּ קָרָ֥א יְהֹוָ֖ה בְּשֵׁ֑ם בְּצַלְאֵ֛ל בֶּן־אוּרִ֥י בֶן־ח֖וּר לְמַטֵּ֥ה יְהוּדָֽה

Exod 35:30 And Moses said to the Israelites: See, YHWH has called by name Bezalel, the son of Uri son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah.

The description of Bezalel in Exodus 35–36 is a repetition of a previous depiction of Bezalel given by God to Moses. There (Exodus 31:1–5), the first person account lends a greater sense of intimacy to the relationship between YHWH andBezalel. God declares to Moses (Exod. 31:2), “*I* have called, by name, Bezalel.” God “calls” someone “by name” in only two other verses in the Bible: when God proclaims God’s own name (in Exod. 33:19) and also when God “calls” Israel “by name” (Isa. 43:1). In each of these contexts, the phrase indicates a distinctive relationship with the individual (Bezalel) or the people (Israel) that God is calling.

The meaning of Bezalel ben Uri’s name –“In the shadow of El, the son of my light”–lends credence to the notion of a special relationship between God and Bezalel. Furthermore, Moses’/God’s declaration (Exod. 35:30/Exod. 31:2) that God has “filled” Bezalel with the “breath/wind/spirit of God” (*ruach elohim*) places this artisan in a select category of biblical personages upon whom the “spirit/breath/wind of God” comes, including, Joseph, Saul, Ezekiel and Daniel.[5]

The description in Exodus 35–36, when taken together with the meaning of the name Bezalel, suggests, as Mark S. Smith has written, “an unusual intimacy between God and this otherwise shadowy figure.”[6]

Explaining Bezalel’s Unique Abilities

Since the early centuries of the Common Era, commentators have noted Bezalel’s unique qualities and have raised questions as to his identity. This is clearly reflected, for example, in the later exegetical collection of midrashic collection on the book of Exodus, *Shemot Rabbah*(40:2),describes Bezalel as having been chosen by God at the beginning of time.[7]

Removing the Supernatural Description

Perhaps out of concern that the superlative nature of the description in Exodus was motivating comparisons between Bezalel and Greco-Roman gods, Josephus, in his *Antiquities* (1st Century, CE), took pains to recast Bezalel’s commissioning by God and removes God’s calling (*kara*) of Bezalel:

“[Moses] appointed construction supervisors for the works…their names…were these: Basaelos, son of Ouri of the tribe of Ioudas, grandson of Mariamme the sister of the general and Elibazos, son of Isamachos, of the tribe of Dan (*Antiquities* 3.104-5).”[8]

Whereas in the Bible, God chooses the architects for the building, in the *Antiquities* (3.104) Moses selects the architects “in accordance with the instruction of God,” thereby transforming Bezalel from a uniquely gifted craftsman to a humanly chosen member of a team of architects.[9] Perhaps he did so out of concern that the superlative nature of the description in Exodus motivated comparisons between Bezalel and Greco-Roman gods.[10]

Bezalel the Master Sage

The medieval commentator, Abraham ibn Ezra (1089–1164) (Exod. 31:3), notes that Bezalel:

היה מלא כל חכמה וחשבון, ומדות, וערכים, ומלאכת השמים וחכמת התולדת, וסוד הנשמה. והיה לו יתרון על כל אנשי דורו...

was filled with all wisdom and mathematics, measurements and valuations, and astronomy, knowledge of history, and the secret of the soul. He possessed skill over all the people of his generation...

According to ibn Ezra, Bezalal was simply a master scholar.

Bezalel the Ancestor of Artisans

The Protestant 20th Century German scholar Martin Noth, in *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions*, explains the illustrious description of Bezalel by positing that Bezalel was an ancestor of a distinguished family living during the Second Temple Period.[11] Similarly, Ronald E. Clements suggests that Bezalel and Oholiab are ancestors of artisan guilds.[12]

The Israelite Kothar

Reading Exodus’ description of Bezalel from a somewhat more historical-critical orientation than that of his predecessors, the early Jewish 20th century scholar Umberto (Rabbi Moshe David) Cassuto, in his commentary to the Book of Exodus, emphasized the similarities between Bezalel’s attributes and descriptions of the Ugaritic, artisan deity Kothar-wa-Ḫasis. In the Ba(al and Anat cycle, Yamm (the god of the sea) commissions Kothar-wa-Ḫasis to build him a palace. When Ba(al and Anat defeat Yamm, however, Kothar-wa-Ḫasis ends up building the palace for Ba(al. Cassuto sees Bezalal as an alternative to Kothar-wa-Ḫasis, and he interprets the biblical material as a critique of Canaanite legends and polytheism.[13]



Baal Bronze figurine, 14th-12th centuries, Ras Shamra (ancient Ugarit)

The parallels between Bezalel and Kothar wa-Ḫasis should not be taken lightly. Scholars have observed striking similarities between the portrayal of Bezalel and the descriptions of this Ugaritic deity, which are found in the Ugaritic creation myth, the Ba(al and Anat Cycle.[14] Like Bezalel, Kothar–wa-Ḫasis’s skill set encompasses all crafts and he, like, Bezalel, builds a house for a deity, the Canaanite god of creation, Ba(al – Hadad.

Additionally, epithets for Kothar-wa-Ḫasis are analogous to elements of the description of Bezalel.[15] The Ugaritic deity is known as the “Wise One” (*Ḫss*) (corresponding to *chochmah*); Kothar wa-Hasis is called “the deft one” (Ugaritic: *ḫrš yd*) a name that corresponds to Bezalel’s being able to carve or craft (*cheresh*) stone, wood, or metal.

The Impotence of Foreign Deities

Most Jews (and non-Jews, for that matter) consider the Torah to be a monotheistic text created by a monotheistic people. Scholars, however, have concluded that a four-level divine hierarchy existed in Syria-Palestine from the middle of the second millennium B.C.E. to the middle of the first millennium B.C.E: the period during which much of the Bible was created.[16] This fourfold hierarchy comprised authoritative deities, active deities, artisan deities, and messenger deities, and reflected a four-fold human hierarchy that included the aristocracy, royal servants, skilled craftsmen and slaves.

We find traces of this monarchical polytheism or henotheism (the worship of one god without denying the existence of other gods) in biblical texts, and the description of Bezalel gives us a glimpse of this religious milieu: the same terms that describe the Ugaritic artisan deity are utilized to describe, in the Bible, not a artisan deity, but an artisan.

The writers of the Torah (and the Bible as a whole) endeavored “to make the case” for YHWH as the most powerful god in an existing, divine hierarchy. Only in its latest texts (for example the Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40 – 66) does the Bible assert the sole existence of one supreme deity.

Umberto Cassuto was most likely correct when he wrote that, “The qualities attributed by the Canaanites [to Kothar wa-Ḫasis]…are here ascribed” to a human being endowed by God: Bezalel.[17] By attributing to a human artisan what were considered by non-Israelites to be divine traits, the writers of Exodus convey an implicit message of foreign deities’ impotence.

Going Monotheist

The Bezalel account is only one part of a literary process that, overtime, elevated YHWH to the top of a prevalent, divine hierarchy. If we look beyond the Torah we see that the same trinity of attributes (wisdom, discernment, and technical skill) given by God to Bezalel to build the Tabernacle, is utilized by YHWH to construct the world. As we read in the Book of Proverbs

משלי ג:יט יְ־הֹוָה בְּחׇכְמָה יָסַד אָרֶץ כּוֹנֵן שָׁמַיִם בִּתְבוּנָה. ג:כ בְּדַעְתּוֹ תְּהוֹמוֹת נִבְקָעוּ...

Prov 3:19 YHWH founded the earth by wisdom (*chochmah*); He established the heavens by understanding (*tevunah*); 3:20 By His knowledge (*da’at*) the depths burst apart.”

Elsewhere, in the Book of Isaiah, God declares:

ישעיהו נד:טז (הן) [הִנֵּה] אָנֹכִי בָּרָאתִי חָרָשׁ נֹפֵחַ בְּאֵשׁ פֶּחָם וּמוֹצִיא כְלִי לְמַעֲשֵׂהוּ

Isa 54:16 It is I who created the smith to fan the charcoal fire and produce the tools for his work...

The Bible asserts that YHWH is the source of human creativity. YHWH , and no other deity, “endows” — or in the language of the Exodus 35–36, “fills” — humans with wisdom, discernment, and technical skill. So too, the Bible asserts, YHWH is the sole artisan deity and YHWH’smasterpiece, is the world.

[View Footnotes](https://www.thetorah.com/article/bezalel-ben-uri-and-the-impotence-of-foreign-deities)

1. See Benno Jacob, *The Second Book of the Bible: Exodus* (trans. W.Jacob; Hoboken, NJ: Ktav, 1997), 842; and W. Propp, *Exodus 19-40*: *A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (The Anchor Bible; New York, Doubleday, 2006), 488.
2. See Michael Carasik, *Theologies of the Mind in Biblical Israel* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006), p. 221.
3. This orientation towards human thinking and creativity is summarized in the Priestly statement: “The Lord saw… how every plan devised by [man’s] mind nothing but evil all the time (Gen. 6:5).” For other examples of the Bible’s pejorative orientation towards human creativity, see Isa. 65:2; Jer. 4:14; Jer. 18:12; Psa. 94:11; and Prov. 19:21.
4. See Exod. 35:34.
5. Other biblical characters who experience God’s *ruach*include: Joseph (Gen. 41:38), Balaam (Num. 24:2), Saul (1 Sam. 10:10; 11:6; 16:5), Ezekiel (Ezek. 11:24), Daniel (5:11,14) and Zechariah (2 Chron. 24:20).
6. See M. Smith, *Kothar wa-Ḫasis, the Ugaritic Craftsman God* (Dissertation; Yale University, 1985), 100.

ומה עשה הקדוש ברוך הוא הביא לו ספרו של אדם הראשון והראה לו כל הדורות שהן עתידין לעמוד מבראשית עד תחיית המתים, דור ודור ומלכיו, דור ודור ומנהיגיו, דור ודור ונביאיו, אמר לו כל אחד ואחד התקנתיו מאותה שעה, וכן בצלאל מאותה שעה התקנתיו, הוי ראה קראתי בשם בצלאל.

1. See *Flavius Josephus: Translation and Commentary: Judean Antiquities 1–4*, tr. L. Feldman, ed. S. Mason (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1999), 257–8.
2. See Steven Fine, “‘See, I Have Called by the *Renowned*Name of Bezalel, Son of Uri…’: Josephus’ Portrayal of the Biblical ‘Architect’ ,” In *The Temple of Jerusalem: From Moses to the Messiah: in honor of Professor Louis H. Feldman*, edited by Steven (Leiden: Brill, 2011), p. 29 – 30.
3. See Fine, p. 30.
4. See Martin Noth, *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions* (trans. Bernhard W. Anderson; Englewood Cliffs: New Jersey, 1972), 188.,
5. See Ronald E. Clements, *Exodus*: *The Cambridge Bible Commentary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1972), 199.
6. See Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (trans. I Abrahams; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1974), 402.
7. See KTU 1.1 III; KTU 1.2 IV; KTU 1.4 V-VIII.
8. See Smith, *Kothar wa-Ḫasis*, 51-100.
9. See Lowell K. Handy, *Among the Host of Heaven* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1994), p. 3.
10. See Cassuto, 402.