

# Ancient Near East Religions and Israelite Monotheism

## Egyptian cosmology and biblical cosmology

The Papyrus Bremner-Rhind provides the best creation account from Egyptian religion. Atum emerged out of the cosmic ocean [limitless waters], so there was a time when this creator god did not exist, in contrast to the revelation of the Old Testament, which says the one Yahweh has eternally existed and is not derived from anything else [Psalm 90; Isaiah 40].

Atum copulated with his hand, put semen in his mouth, and sneezed Shu [air] and spat Tefnut [moisture], the atmospheric void between the upper and lower waters; they in turn produced Geb [earth] and Nut [sky]; they in turn produced Osiris, Seth, Isis, Nephtys. This is pantheistic, in that all matter is coming from Atum's essence. In the Old Testament revelation, Yahweh – though he is omnipresent [Psalm 139; Jeremiah 33] – is transcendent, separate from his creation [Genesis 1]; and Yahweh created everything out of nothing, speaking things into existence [Genesis 1].

Seth killed Osiris and threw the pieces in the Nile; Isis put the pieces back together and got pregnant by him. They produced Horus, who represented kingship and defeated Seth, and was represented by the sun, called Re. The living Pharaoh [as king] in a sense becomes this god, the first born son of Osiris. This was significant when Yahweh struck down the first born son of the Pharaoh during the exodus, for he killed the next Pharaoh. When the Pharaoh died, he would become Osiris, the god of the underworld.

People came from the tears of Atum, from the essence of this god. In the Old Testament revelation, Yahweh made people in his image [Genesis 1], but he made man out of soil of the Earth and then breathed life into him; and he made the first woman from the first man [Genesis 2].

The book of Nut provides a picture: Shu standing on Geb [earth], holding up an arching Nut [sky], with her head in the west and her feet in the east. This allows her to swallow the sun in the evening, which passes through her, and for her to give birth to the sun in the morning. In Nut's womb at night, the sun is regenerated. In the Old Testament revelation, Yahweh controls the sun [Psalm 74].

With proper burial, ritual, and provisions, the individual could have a life beyond death, though the body would stay on earth and just the immaterial part of a person would get new life. As it says in our handout, "The key was unification with the divine realm in a daily cycle of rebirth that paralleled the birth of the cosmos. In the Dragon Myth, there is a serpent in the underworld waters through which Osiris passes each night, who tries to stop Osiris. If the individual was united with Osiris, he would revive to see another day.

Beyond Nut is uniform darkness, beyond the light of the sun, the ocean. Even the gods did not know what was out there. In the Old Testament revelation, Yahweh made all the heavens [Genesis 1].

In Coffin Text 80, there is a different creation account. From out of eight infinite deities beyond the horizon, in the darkness and waters, emerged the primeval hill, and on the hill came Shu. People emerged from Shu's eye as tears, instead of from Atum's. A deceased person identifies with Shu in this text, instead of Osiris.

In the Memphis Creation Story, Ptah created the world by his word. However, Ptah himself is identified with the primordial waters, and from them came all the other gods and all of creation, so Ptah is not transcendent of his creation and this is still pantheistic.

In the Instruction of Merikare, it says people are the images of Re, but it says they came from his body, so this is still pantheistic.

It is worth noting that Yahweh somewhat mocked Egyptian religion during the exodus plagues [Exodus 12], because several of the plagues were attacks on the power of specific Egyptian deities, showing them to be powerless in the face of the true God, Yahweh. Examples are turning the Nile to blood [Apis], sending frogs under his control [Heka], plauging cattle [hathor], darkness [Re], and the plague against the first born even of Pharaoh [Horus].

## Mesopotamian cosmology and biblical cosmology

Mesopotamian cosmology is centered on the need to feed the gods: the gods created men to do the work of cultivating the fields for them and to construct temples [Eridu Genesis; Epic of Atrakhasis; Enuma Elish], so the gods could eat [Epic of Atrakhasis]. In the Old Testament revelation, the one God [Deuteronomy 6], Yahweh, is complete, not needing any help or sustenance [Psalm 50; Deuteronomy 32]; and Yahweh embodies all power [Isaiah 14] as opposed to the Mesopotamian gods who have to vie for power.

In Sumerian religion, the gods themselves emerged out of the chaos ocean, and then the elements of the universe were derived from the gods and are inseparable from the gods in a quasi-pantheistic way. These gods created the earth as a platform for the temple, where they could eat [Enki and the ordering of the world]. In Babylonian religion, Marduk created the elements of the universe from the carcass of Tiamat, whom he had defeated. In the Old Testament revelation, Yahweh has always existed and is not derived from anything else [Psalm 90; Isaiah 40], and – though he is omnipresent [Psalm 139; Jeremiah 33] – he is transcendent, separate from his creation [Genesis 1]; and Yahweh created everything out of nothing, speaking things into existence [Genesis 1].

In Sumerian religion, the lesser gods were on strike because of the hard labor they had to do for the greater gods, so the gods created humans to do this labor [Epic of Atrakhasis]. They slaughtered one of the rebellious gods, and the first people were made out of clay for their material part and the god's flesh for their immaterial part [Epic of Atrakhasis; see also Enki Ninmakh and the Creation of Humankind]. Because of being from the god, the immaterial part of man lives on in the underworld after death. In Babylonian religion, Marduk created people from the body of a rebel god [Enuma Elish]. In the Old Testament revelation, Yahweh made people in his image [Genesis 1], but he made man out of soil of the Earth and then breathed life into him; and he made the first woman from the first man [Genesis 2].

In Mesopotamian religion, the gods authorized kingship [Eridu Genesis]; but what happened on earth paralleled what was happening in the heavens for the gods. In Babylon, Marduk became king of the gods – reflected on earth by the rise of Babylon – by delivering the other gods from a threat through being victorious over Tiamat, who was the chaos waters [Enuma Elish]. In the Old Testament revelation, Yahweh sometimes intervenes in human affairs [throughout Genesis and Exodus, e.g.], but he has complete authority over all heavenly beings, even those that might be taken as gods by people on Earth [Daniel 4].

In Mesopotamian religion, there was a cultural awareness of creation, Eden [Enki & Ninhursag] and the flood [Eridu Genesis; Epic of Gilgamesh], though they changed the details from the revelatory biblical account. To the Sumarians, Paradise was pure, clean, bright, peaceful for both man and beast, and joyful [Enki & Ninhursag]; this is similar to the description in the Old Testament revelation [Genesis 2]. The Sumerians believed the god Enlil sent the flood because humanity had gotten too numerous and noisy for his taste, but the god Enki helped preserve the family of Atrakhasis and his craftsmen; and a good thing too, because the gods were getting hungry without people to provide for them [Epic of Atrakhasis]. The Babylonians had a different flood account [Epic of Gilgamesh], apparently derived from the Sumerian one. In the Old Testament revelation, Yahweh sent the flood because mankind had become too evil [Genesis 6].

## **Similarities between ancient near eastern stories about the gods and the imagery used in the Old Testament**

In summary, in the Old Testament revelation, Yahweh used culturally aware terminology and metaphors to speak effectively to his people and to provide an effective polemic against the Canaanite religion of the area.

In the Baal Cycle, Baal is triumphant over Yamm, god of the sea/chaos, and Lotan, the great serpent. In the Old Testament revelation, Yahweh is triumphant over chaos/evil [Genesis 1], including the sea monster [Isaiah 27; Psalm 74]. In fact, what are seen as pantheistic gods by other cultures is here seen to be mere creations of Yahweh [Job 38; Genesis 1]. The true God, Yahweh, is enthroned above the waters and has authority over them and all the Earth, exercisable with merely his voice [Psalm 29].

In the Baal Cycle, the gods gather and praise Baal on Mt. Zaphon. In the Old Testament revelation, Yahweh is on Mt. Zion, the real Mt. Zaphon [Psalm 48]. In the Baal Cycle, there are other gods – the sons of the mighty – who have jurisdiction over Baal at times. In the Old Testament revelation, the sons of the mighty are angels who worship Yahweh [Psalm 29].

In the Baal Cycle, Baal is the “rider on the clouds” who brings rain from the western sea. In the Old Testament revelation, Yahweh is the one whose chariot is the clouds [Psalm 104] and it is he who brings rain [Genesis 2; Psalm 68].

In the Baal Cycle, Baal causes flooding, lightning, and thunder, making the Earth shake with his voice, and will complete his house with cedars from Lebanon and Sirion and bricks from clay. In the Old Testament revelation, Yahweh has authority over the waters, his voice yields the thunder and lightning, and Yahweh can shatter the cedars of Lebanon and Sirion and disrupt the stability of the clay of the ground [Psalm 29].

In the Baal Cycle, the god El laments in part by cutting himself. In the Old Testament revelation, the prophets of Baal do the same [1 Kings 18]. In the Baal Cycle, the god El comes off his throne and sits on his footstool, as part of his approach to Earth. In the Old Testament revelation, Yahweh’s ark of the covenant is called a footstool [1 Chronicles 28; Psalm 99], as is the whole Earth [Isaiah 66].

In the Baal Cycle, the goddess Anat says she will know if Baal is “resurrected” in that there will be rain and fertility again in the land. In the Old Testament revelation, Yahweh empowers Elijah to do miracles that mock this assurance, controlling the rain and even the dew, and thus fertility; even in the drought, providing oil and flour; and even providing life [1 Kings 17-18]. Yahweh also empowered Elijah to cause lightning strikes [1 Kings 18; 2 Kings 1], ascend in a whirlwind [2 Kings 2], and control waters [2 Kings 2], while Yahweh empowered Elisha to control waters, purify waters, even provide waters without rain [2 Kings 2-3], provide oil [2 Kings 3], and create new life in the womb [2 Kings 4].

In the Baal Cycle, death swallows gods and people. In the Old Testament revelation, Yahweh will swallow death [Isaiah 25].

## **Refuting the idea that monotheism was patterned after the Egyptian model during the exile**

While it is true that in some Egyptian circles their polytheism had evolved into a “one and many” system in which the gods were quasi-pantheistic manifestations of one god [see the Hymn to Amon-Re, which said he was the sole god], Israel’s monotheism was different in that the one God, Yahweh, was transcendent from creation and – though he might have been called by various theologically oriented monikers – he was never represented as multiple gods.

From the Hymn to Aten, we see that during the period of Akhenaten’s influence, worship became centered on one god without denial of the existence of others; this is monolatry, which was focused on Aten, the solar disk, which itself had been a manifestation of Amon Re. There is a continuum of sorts from polytheism [worship of many] to henotheism [worship of one in preference over the many] to monolatry [worship of one only but without denial of the existence of many] to monotheism [worship of one and denial of many]. Israel’s religion was monotheistic and unique in this geographic area, in that there was only one creator God, Yahweh, there were no other beings in his class, and he was transcendent from his creation.

There were several serious differences between Akhenaten’s religion and that of Israel. First, Akhenaten’s religion was still pantheistic, whereas the Israelite religion had a transcendent God, Yahweh. Second, Akhenaten claimed sole contact with Aten, whereas the Israelite God, Yahweh, had made his revelation through multiple people and through visible signs like the cloud and pillar of fire and manna, while anyone could approach Yahweh through prayer. Third, Akhenaten and his wife, Nefertiti, accepted offerings made to them as divines, whereas in the Israelite religion, offerings could only be made to Yahweh as the only divine. Fourth, Akhenaten’s religion was non-ethical in nature, whereas in the Israelite religion, much of what Yahweh revealed had to do with ethics.

There is no denying that throughout its national history from the time of the exodus all the way until the final exile, Israel struggled with idolatry, both in misrepresenting the true God, Yahweh, and in dabbling in polytheism. The Old Testament itself reveals this through texts of various periods such as worship of Baals and Asherahs in the time of the Judges [Judges 3], Solomon’s own idolatry during the early monarchy [1 Kings 11], hundreds of Baal and Asherah prophets during the divided monarchy [1 Kings 15; 18], Baal and Asherah images in Yahweh’s temple during the late monarchy [2 Kings 21; 23]. So it is not theologically disturbing to learn of archeological evidence showing that – despite warnings such as Exodus 20 – many Israelites had idolatrous statues in their homes. As the Old Testament reveals, at all times there were groups who were orthodox in their beliefs and worship concerning Yahweh.

We could put the evidence into four quadrants based on two axis: official vs. folk; and orthodox by revelation vs. unorthodox. Official and orthodox would include Solomon’s temple; official and unorthodox would include the Arad temple and the images placed in the Solomonic temple; folk and unorthodox would include the figurines of Asherah; folk and orthodox would include Elijah’s alter on Mt. Carmel. What some atheistic scholars do is deny there was any revelation and thus any orthodoxy, and so they see the evidence of polytheism and idolatry and come to an erroneous conclusion about the development of religion in Israel. This argument for a pluralism of “Yahwehisms” is analogous to the contention for multiple competing “Christianities” in the early church: it is dependent on denial of revelation and orthodoxy. The problem is that their presupposition of no revelation and no orthodoxy is of no more intellectual value than our presupposition of revelation which led to orthodoxy, and our belief system fits the data as well or better than theirs.

The contention that monotheism in Israel did not develop until after the exile is also based on the contention that the majority of the Pentateuch also dates to the exile, instead of to the Mosaic period. But there are clear references to Deuteronomic thought and Pentateuch-consistent history in the prophets [e.g. Hosea 13; Isaiah 45] and there are many good arguments [outlined in another essay] for believing the Pentateuch dates to Mosaic times. That being true, we can see the early evidence in the Pentateuch [Exodus 15; Deuteronomy 32], pre-exilic psalms [Psalms 29; 82], and prophets [Nahum] for strong monotheism.