
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
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TO WHAT EXTENT MUST THE RELIGION OF THE ANCESTORS BE
DIFFERENTIATED FROM THAT OF THE OFFICIAL POLYTHEISMS OF
MESOPOTAMIA?

RGB1005HS – ONLINE – INTRODUCTION TO THE OLD TESTAMENT
MASTER OF ARTS IN MINISTRY AND SPIRITUALITY

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JANUARY 24, 2015

The Ancient Near East area of Mesopotamia (regions of modern day Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey) embraced the Tigris – Euphrates river system. This area offered fertile lands – a haven for the development of agriculture and subsequently a mainstay for ancient civilizations that were evolving from nomadic to sedentary lifestyles. We are reminded that the ‘...“dawn of history” refers to the appearance of *written records* of human activities, first in Mesopotamia and shortly afterward in Egypt.’¹ From archeological discoveries we are able to learn of the cultural and societal aspects of these ancient peoples including those of the Semitic Sumerian, Akkadian, Babylonian and Assyrian empires that settled in this region. While archeological finds cannot unequivocally affirm what we read in the Hebrew Scriptures, it does provide insights into Biblical customs and practices.²

It is further pointed out that the dawn of history also resulted in the establishment of socially stratified societies having political, economic and religious characteristics. Temple scribes and priests were charged with “...providing the ideological justification and legitimization of the existing social and political order through the production of a religious literature – myths, epics, prayers, rituals – and through the conduct of a... state sponsored cult.”³ Consequently, myths and cults associated with divine beings legitimized the social organization of these societies.

Polytheism was normative in the Near Eastern culture in the second millennium B.C.E. In the absence of science and with no reliable or predictable way to account for situations or outcomes, myths were created as a means to explain cosmological and climactic events, as well as to answer the question of *how did we get here*. With regards to creation, there is one myth that is of particular interest. The Mesopotamian Epic of Atrahasis is a

1. Anthony R. Ceresko, *Introduction to the Old Testament: a liberation perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 32.

2. Lawrence Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament: an introduction* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1984), 67.

3. Ceresko, 133.

mythical account that involved a hierarchy of divine beings, and assigned to them various worldly elements. Anu was the chief god and ruled the sky, Enlil ruled the land and Enki ruled the water. Subordinate gods – the Igigu - were responsible for the care of the earth. When the stewardship tasks of the Igigu became burdensome, humans were created in order to be labourers of the earth. They were fashioned from various earthly elements including clay. Eventually the humans become bothersome because their population has greatly multiplied. A plot devised by Enlil unfolded which would see the elimination of humanity by a plague, then famine, and finally drought. When these attempts were unsuccessful, a flood was sent. One human – Atrahasis – was able to thwart Enlil’s successive plans to destroy mankind. At the direction of Enki, he fashioned a boat and took livestock and his family aboard in order to survive the flood. There are significant similarities between the Epic of Atrahasis and the narratives in Genesis 1-11 including stories describing Creation and The Flood. The similarities include aspects of nature, climactic catastrophes, heroes, villains, conflict, death by floodwaters and rebirth.

Boadt points out that the Genesis authors did not hesitate to make use of mythical genres and similar literary forms when fashioning biblical stories. Key to this point, as Boadt describes, is the fact that the biblical “myth” did not always have the same world view as the original pagan story. This is a key differentiator between the polytheisms associated with the ancient religions to that of the theology of the authors of Genesis 1-11 and the religion of ancestral Israel. These authors leveraged the traditional themes that most civilizations were already familiar with and accepted as true. However, the authors of Genesis 1-11 intentionally reworked these stories in order to present a different theological perspective.⁴ Instead of numerous gods of either male or female likeness, controlling different aspects of climate, weather, nature, human emotion, patronage etc., there was one God, the Creator who

4.Boadt, 131.

had dominion over all of nature and created man in his likeness. Another key differentiator is highlighted by Collins who points out that the character of the God of Genesis 1-11 had been refashioned; the gods in Atrahasis were not entirely in control, they were reactionary when crises arose and they were not seen to offer moral direction.⁵ There was no place for these weak attributes in the theology that the Genesis writers were presenting.

Therefore we see the theology of the God of the ancestors reflected in these early passages of Genesis. God created man in his own image (Gen 1:26) and God freely gave all that he has created to mankind (Gen 1:28-30). God did not want man to be lonely, so he created a companion (Gen 2:21-23). God created a perfect world, but the world becomes corrupt when man tried to sever his relationship with God (Gen 3:5-6, Gen 4:8, Gen 6:5). God punished the world and wiped out humanity save for Noah (Gen 6-9). God makes a covenant with Noah that he will never again eliminate the world. (Gen 8:21).

The early chapters of Genesis act as an introduction to the Pentateuch and can be considered a collection of mythical stories that set the stage for the history of the Jewish nation and the Jewish worldview. In his survey article, Robert Gnuse states that ‘Monotheism develops most fully in the context of serious intellectual struggles such as the question of theodicy and the presence of evil in the world... Jews would have experienced this process in the Babylonian Exile (586-539 B.C.E.) and in the years thereafter.’⁶

In summary, the extent of the differentiation between the polytheisms of Mesopotamia and the ancestral Hebrew religion must embrace a rework of the accepted myths of the prevailing cultures, thereby refashioning the concept and character of one God.

5. John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004), 31.

6. Robert Gnuse, “The Emergence of Monotheism in Ancient Israel: A Survey of Recent Scholarship,” *Religion* 29,4 (October 1999): 316, accessed January 17, 2015. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1006/reli.1999.0198>

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