

ANCIENT RELIGIONS

Sarah Iles Johnston

GENERAL EDITOR

The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press

Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England

2007

Contents

Introduction • <i>Sarah Iles Johnston</i>	<i>vii</i>
Note on Translation and Transliteration	<i>xiii</i>
Abbreviations	<i>xv</i>
Maps	<i>xvi</i>
ENCOUNTERING ANCIENT RELIGIONS	
What Is Ancient Mediterranean Religion? • <i>Fritz Graf</i>	3
Monotheism and Polytheism • <i>Jan Assmann</i>	17
Ritual • <i>Jan Bremmer</i>	32
Myth • <i>Fritz Graf</i>	45
Cosmology: Time and History • <i>John J. Collins</i>	59
Pollution, Sin, Atonement, Salvation • <i>Harold W. Attridge</i>	71
Law and Ethics • <i>Eckart Otto</i>	84
Mysteries • <i>Sarah Iles Johnston</i>	98
Religions in Contact • <i>John Scheid</i>	112
Writing and Religion • <i>Mary Beard</i>	127
Magic • <i>Sarah Iles Johnston</i>	139
HISTORIES	
Egypt • <i>Jan Assmann and David Frankfurter</i>	155
Mesopotamia • <i>Paul-Alain Beaulieu</i>	165
Syria and Canaan • <i>David P. Wright</i>	173
Israel • <i>John J. Collins</i>	181
Anatolia: Hittites • <i>David P. Wright</i>	189
Iran • <i>William Malandra and Michael Stausberg</i>	197
Minoan and Mycenaean Civilizations • <i>Nanno Marinatos</i>	206

Greece • <i>Jon Mikalson</i>	210
Etruria • <i>Olivier de Cazanove</i>	220
Rome • <i>John North</i>	225
Early Christianity • <i>Harold W. Attridge</i>	233
Epilogue • <i>Bruce Lincoln</i>	241
Contributors	253
Index	255

Monotheism and Polytheism

Jan Assmann

What is polytheism?

“Monotheism” and “polytheism” are recent words, not older than the 17th century CE, and they have different statuses. Monotheism is a general term for religions that confess to and worship only one god. “One God!” (*Heis Theos*) or “No other gods!” (first commandment)—these are the central mottos of monotheism. The religions subsumed under the term *polytheism* cannot, however, be reduced to a single motto of opposite meaning, such as “Many gods!” or “No exclusion of other gods!” On the contrary, the unity or oneness of the divine is an important topic in Egyptian, Babylonian, Indian, Greek, and other polytheistic traditions. Polytheism is simply a less polemical substitute for what monotheistic traditions formerly called “idolatry” and “paganism” (Hebrew *‘ăbôdâ zārâ*, Arabic *shirk* or *jahiliya*). Whereas monotheism constitutes a self-description of religions subsumed under that term, no such self-description exists for polytheistic religions. Monotheism asserts its identity by opposing itself to polytheism, whereas no polytheistic religion ever asserted itself in contradistinction to monotheism, for the simple reason that polytheism is always the older or “primary” and monotheism the newer or “secondary” type of religion. Monotheism is self-description, polytheism is construction of the other. However, although polytheistic religions include a concept of divine unity, these religions undoubtedly do worship a plethora of gods, which justifies applying a word built on the element *poly* (many) to them. Unity in this case does not mean the exclusive worship of one god, but the structure and coherence of the divine world, which is not just an accumulation of deities, but a structured whole, a pantheon.

Theologia tripertita

The most cogent theory of polytheism comes from an ancient author. Varro’s concept of a “tripartite theology” refers to a general structure that is perfectly

well applicable not only to the Roman and Greek religions that Varro had in mind, but also to ancient Egyptian and Babylonian religions. These religions know three spheres or dimensions of divine presence and religious experience, which closely correspond to Varro's three theologies, showing that we are dealing here with a rather general structure of polytheism. His *theologia naturalis* (Greek *theologia kosmikē*, cosmic theology) corresponds to the cosmic dimension of divine manifestation; his *theologia civilis* (Greek *theologia politikē*, political theology) corresponds to the cultic dimension; and his *theologia fabularis* (Greek *theologia mythikē*, mythical or narrative theology) corresponds to the dimension of *historia divina*, the stories about the gods, their names, epithets, and genealogies (*Antiquitates rerum divinarum*, frags. 6–10 Cardauns).

Cosmos. The first dimension of divine presence or manifestation is the cosmos or nature. Polytheistic cosmology views the cosmos as a cooperative process: the deities cooperate in creating and maintaining the world. In Egypt, the sun-god and his daily course across the sky and the underworld beneath the earth form the center of this processual cosmology. In Babylonia and Greece, the gods seem to be less involved in maintaining the cosmic process and freer to intervene in human affairs. There, the aspect of unity and coherence is expressed above all in social and political terms, especially in the model of a royal court. However, the idea of a highest god who rules as a king over the world of gods is common to all polytheisms of the ancient world. Political philosopher Eric Voegelin has coined the term *Summo-Deism* in order to emphasize the hierarchical structure of polytheism. Typically, the highest god is also the creator (Marduk in Babylonia; Re, later Amun-Re, in Egypt; although in Greece and Rome, according to the best-known cosmologies, neither Zeus/Jupiter nor any other god creates the world; it simply develops out of Chaos on its own).

In Egypt, the highest god combines the aspects of creator, sun, and king. Here, the idea of unity seems most prominent. Before the monotheistic revolution of Akhenaten, however, the fundamental plurality of the divine world in its cosmic manifestation was never questioned. The cosmic process was viewed as an interplay of convergent and divergent powers. Two otherwise antagonistic powers, Horus, the god of royal legitimacy, and Seth, the god of anarchic violence and force, cooperated in defending the sun-god against Apopis, a water-dragon personifying chaos. The order must always be defended against a gravitation toward disorder or entropy. Order is time or movement, and it would come to an immediate standstill if the foe were definitely annihilated once and for all.

In the eyes of the Egyptians, the success of the cosmic process was always at risk. In the same way as the Mesopotamians, the Chinese, and the Romans, Egyptians were constantly occupied in watching the sky and in observing all kinds of natural phenomena with the greatest attention. But whereas in Mesopotamia, China, and Rome this attention was associated with various forms of divination that served to reveal the will of the gods and to foretell the future, in Egypt it was connected with the daily ritual that served to assist the gods in

maintaining the world, supplementing divine action with ritual action. Thus, the Egyptians observed the regular and the recurrent, whereas cultures that focused on divination observed the exceptional and deviant. In the context of this task and their intellectual preoccupation with it, the Egyptians accumulated an incredible amount of knowledge, a kind of sacred cosmology, whereas the Sumerians and Babylonians, in the context of their preoccupation with divination, accumulated a similar mass of omen literature, which established connections between divine signs and historical or biographical events.

The cosmic dimension provides evidence of the gods through the natural world and its phenomena. Nobody would dream of denying the existence of the divine powers: they are overwhelmingly present in the shape of sun and moon; air, water, fire, and earth; life and death; war and peace; and so on. It is possible to neglect them, to break one of their specific taboos, to miss the correct performance of their rites, but it is impossible to either enter or leave a relationship which is always already established, into which we are born, and which is never the matter of a personal decision.

Cult and political organization. The second dimension consists of the various forms of terrestrial governance in which the gods of a polytheistic pantheon typically participate. The more important deities of a pantheon are "town-gods," and the more important urban centers of a country are a god's cities in the sense that they are strongly associated with the name of a deity whose temple is the chief temple of that town: Marduk and Babylon, Assur and the city Assur, Athena and Athens, Ptah and Memphis, and so on. The pantheon is an assembly of town lords and temple owners, headed, in some cases, by a god whose temple is in the capital and who, for this reason, rules not only his city but the whole country (e.g., Marduk and Babylon) or, in other cases, who has important cults in virtually every city, even if the city worships another divinity as its own (e.g., Zeus is prominent even in Athens). Aspects both of unity and of diversity are prominent in the political and geographical dimensions of godhead as well. The aspect of unity can be represented by the unity of a country and its hierarchical structure of center and periphery (as in Egypt) or by the periodic gathering together of different towns' citizens at centralized cult places such as Olympia (as in Greece), whereas the aspect of diversity finds its expression in the specific identity and profile of the individual towns and regions.

The political dimension of the divine world may also be called cultic, because it is in their function as town lords and ladies that the deities receive cultic worship. The cult is the service that a lord or lady requires and resembles in many respects a royal ceremonial. The feasts are typically celebrated in the form of a procession and have the clear political meaning of territorial ownership and its annual confirmation.

Myth. The third dimension may be called the personal or biographical aspect of the divine world. In a polytheistic religion, a deity cannot be spoken about without reference to other deities. The gods live, act, and display their personalities and characters in interaction, not only or even primarily with

humans, but with one another, in relation to other gods, in “constellations” that find their expression in myths, genealogies, epithets, names—in short, in everything that can be said about a deity. Divine constellations reflect the fundamental order and elementary structure of human society—husband and wife, brother and sister, mother and son, mother and daughter, father and son, father and daughter, lover and beloved, lord and slave, hero and enemy, and so on. These constellations unfold in stories (myths) of equally fundamental character, founding and modeling the basic structures of human life, institutions, hopes, and experience: love and death, war and peace, identity and transformation, suffering and salvation. The relation between the divine and the human world is anthropomorphic rather than anthropocentric. The natural partner of a deity is another deity, not humanity. The gods of a polytheistic pantheon care above all for themselves, in the second place for their cities and their followers, and only exceptionally for humankind at large. But this relative distance between the divine and the human worlds is compensated for by intense analogy and a relationship of mutual modeling. The structures of the divine world and the stories about the gods reflect the fundamentals of human existence, but they function as models, and not as mirrors. The gods live and die, rule and serve, suffer and enjoy, win and are defeated: they set the norms and forms of human life, which repeats and reflects the timeless models and follows the traces of *historia divina*.

*The “theologization” of history:
Anthropomorphism and anthropocentrism*

The tripartite structure of polytheism establishes a rather indirect relation between gods and humans. The sphere of direct encounters and interventions, which plays such an important role in Greek, Roman, and Babylonian mythology, seems to be missing. How shall we account for the widespread belief that illness and misfortune are expressions of divine wrath and that the gods intervene in various forms in human affairs? There seems to be a fourth dimension of divine manifestation and religious experience, which comprises human life and history.

In Egypt, we actually observe the emergence of history as a fourth parameter or dimension of the divine world, starting with the 18th Dynasty and gaining predominance in the Ramesside age (ca. 1300–1100 BCE). With the emergence of the dimension of history, the relationship between the divine and the human worlds changes from anthropomorphism to anthropocentrism. The gods not only maintain the cosmic process, not only dwell and rule on earth in their temples, and are not only involved in stories that take place in their own sphere among the gods—they also determine the course of human history on earth, the welfare of the state and the people; they do this by sending victories and defeats, health and illness, prosperity and disaster. In Egypt, this “theologization of history” is a new development. In Mesopotamia, however, as in Greece, Rome, and Bronze Age Anatolia, the religious meaning of history seems to

have been a concept that was in place from the start. Gods supervise the observance of treaties and help to protect the integrity of their sanctuaries and cities. In Mesopotamia we also find the concept of a “personal god,” which brings the worlds of gods and humans into closer relationship, while at the same time preserving the principle of plurality and diversity. Each human being has a specific personal god among the lesser gods, who cares for him or her and intercedes on his or her behalf with the greater gods.

Unlike Egypt, where any forms of historiography dealing with longer periods of the past are missing until the Greco-Roman period, Mesopotamia yields many royal inscriptions that narrate the entire extension of a reign and even texts that stretch back over a series of different reigns into the remote past. The Curse on Agade, for example, narrates the history of the rise and fall of the Sargonid Dynasty during the 23rd and 22nd centuries BCE. Among other events it relates how King Naram-Sin destroyed the temple of Enlil in Nippur and how Enlil responded to this crime by sending forth the Guteans, who put an end to the Sargonid Empire. Similarly, the fall of the Empire of Ur is traced back, in another text, to certain transgressions committed by King Shulgi. The theological and juridical concept of religious guilt and divine punishment gives meaning to history and coherence to the chain of events and sequence of dynasties. In Egypt, disaster is a manifestation of chaos and blind contingency. In Mesopotamia, however, it is read as the manifestation of the punishing will of a divinity whose anger has been stirred by the king. In yet other cultures, such as Greece, a disaster can be understood as preordained by fate (*moira*), although fate’s decrees are often carried out by the gods. An event such as the Trojan War, therefore, which was viewed as historical by the Greeks, can be given meaning within a larger context of ongoing human culture.

The apex of the theologization of history is reached with biblical, especially Deuteronomistic, historiography (see Van Seters 1983). The idea of forming an alliance with God instead of only appointing certain deities as supervisors of political alliances draws God much more closely into the ups and downs of human affairs than had been the case in Mesopotamia and its neighboring civilizations. There, history was just a field of possible interventions by the gods, favorable or punitive; now it turns into *one* coherent connection of events stretching from creation until the end of the world, a sequence known as *historia sacra* in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

However, the idea of divine verdict and intervention was not totally absent even in Egypt. On the contrary, the typically Egyptian idea of a judgment after death appears as the strongest possible manifestation of the principle of divine verdict. But the concept of postmortem human immortality provides a horizon of fulfillment beyond history, whereas in Mesopotamia and Israel, where the concept of human immortality is unknown, every account has to be settled on earth. Here, the horizon of fulfillment is confined to the terrestrial world, but stretched into the future, over generations and dynasties.

In Israel, this fourth dimension of theology tends to prevail over and, in the course of time, to replace the three others. With the rise of monotheism, the

cosmos ceases to appear as a manifestation of divine presence and comes to be seen merely as the creation, the work of God. The geographical and cultic dimension is reduced, after the reform of King Josiah at the end of the 7th century, to the temple at Jerusalem and no longer reflects the pluralistic identity of various centers and regions. *Historia divina*, the stories that are told about the gods and that display their characters and their vicissitudes, is turned into *historia sacra*, the story of the One God and his chosen people. *Historia sacra* is the successor of both the third or mythic dimension of narrative articulation of divine constellations and the fourth dimension in the traditional Mesopotamian sense of divine intervention in human affairs. YHWH intervenes in human affairs not only occasionally; in entering the covenant with Israel, concern with human affairs becomes YHWH's dominant trait.

Historia sacra is a dimension of divine presence that excludes the principle of plurality. There can be but one lord of history, one divine partner in a story shared by god and humans. There are, however, surprising parallels to such an extremely anthropocentric conception of the divine even in Egypt. A passage in the Instruction for Merikare speaks of the ways that God cares for humans as his cattle or herd, in terms strongly reminiscent of biblical anthropocentrism:

Humans are well cared for,
the livestock of god:
he made heaven and earth for their sake,
he pushed the greediness of the waters back
and created the air so that their nostrils might live.
His images are they, having come forth from his body.

For their sake he rises to heaven;
it is for them that he has made plants and animals,
birds and fish,
so that they might have food.
If he killed his enemies and went against his children,
this was only because they thought of rebellion.

For their sake he causes there to be light.
To see them he travels [the heavens].
He established for himself a chapel at their back.
When they weep, he hears.
He created for them a ruler in the egg
and a commander to strengthen the backbone of the weak.

He made for them magic as a weapon
to ward off the blow of fate,
watching over them night and day.
He thrashed the cowardly among them,
as a man beats his son for the sake of his brother.
God knows every name.

This is not only an extremely anthropocentric view of creation, it is also a monotheistic view of the divine. The text speaks of God; other gods are not mentioned. This kind of monotheism, however, is not a matter of religion, but of genre and perspective. If one looks at the world in the way that this text does, the principles of plurality and differentiation disappear, and the ultimate unity of the divine appears. This perspective is characteristic of the genre of wisdom literature, a forerunner of moral philosophy that reflects in a very general way on the fundamentals of human existence. Egyptian wisdom literature generally speaks of god instead of specific gods. This is not only a generic term, to be filled in by a specific god as the case may be (*a* god instead of *the* god), but a specific term referring to the sun-god and creator, as in the Instruction of Merikare. In the perspective of moral philosophy, this is the only god that really counts, the one god on which everything else (including the other gods) depends. Such a “monotheism of perspective” is conventionally termed henotheism to distinguish it from monolatry as a monotheism of cult, worship, and commitment, whereas the term *monotheism* is reserved for a combination of both: the transformation of a henotheistic perspective into a full-fledged religion or vice versa, the transformation of a monolatrous cult (which recognizes the existence of other gods but worships only one) into a religion adopting the henotheistic perspective in which the other gods do not exist at all.

In Egypt, the henotheistic perspective of wisdom literature and the polytheism of cult coexist without any apparent conflict. During the New Kingdom, however, the henotheistic perspective starts to affect certain domains of temple literature as well, especially hymns to Amun-Re, the god of the capital, Thebes, who becomes identified with the sun-god of Heliopolis. An early hymn to this god, dating back perhaps even before the New Kingdom, adopts the anthropocentric and henotheistic perspective of Merikare:

Hail, Re, lord of justice,
 whose chapel is hidden, lord of the gods,
 Khepri in his boat,
 at whose command the gods emerge,
 Atum, creator of human beings,
 who differentiates them and makes them live,
 who distinguishes people by the color of their skin,
 who hears the prayers of those in distress,
 and is well disposed to those who call on him,
 who rescues the fearful from the overbearing,
 who judges between rich and poor,
 lord of perception, on whose lips is the creative word,
 it is for his sake that Hapi has come,
 lord of sweetness, great of love,
 it is to make people live that he has come.

To be sure, the gods, plural, are mentioned in this text, which is still a far cry from real monotheism and even henotheism. Yet the gods are put on a

level with humans and every other creature, and the general view is clearly anthropocentric and henotheistic. Akhenaten's monotheistic Amarna revolution is the radical consequence of this shift from mythical anthropomorphism to philosophical anthropocentrism. It realizes the henotheistic perspective in terms of cult and religious institutions, turning the sun- and creator-god into the sole and only one and denying the other gods any worship and even existence. In the aftermath of this revolutionary step, the gods are readmitted into cult and general worldview; the henotheistic perspective, however, still prevails, and the gods tend now to be demoted, especially in hymns to Amun, to "names," "manifestations," "symbols," "limbs," and so on, of the One. This post-Amarna theology is closer to pantheism than to monotheism; however, the tripartite structure of divine presence—the cosmic, cultic, and mythic dimensions—is again fully expressed in the religious life of the country, and the new concept of a fourth dimension, history, does not in any way invalidate the importance of the other three.

What is monotheism?

Evolutionary monotheism

The idea of unity is not alien to polytheistic religions. On the contrary, the emphasis on the oneness or uniqueness of God or the ultimate unity of the divine world with its plethora of deities is obvious in Mesopotamian and Egyptian texts and increases over time.

Translating gods. In polytheistic religions, the deities are clearly differentiated and personalized by name, shape, and function. The great achievement of polytheism is the articulation of a common semantic universe. It is this semantic dimension that makes the names translatable—that is, makes it possible for gods from different cultures or parts of a culture to be equated with one another. Tribal religions are ethnocentric. The powers and ancestral spirits worshiped by one tribe are different from those worshiped by another tribe. In contrast, the highly differentiated members of polytheistic pantheons lend themselves easily to cross-cultural translation or "interpretation." Translation functions because the names not only have a reference, but also a meaning, namely, the god's specific character as it is unfolded in cosmological speculation, myths, hymns, rites, and so on. This character makes a deity comparable to other deities with similar traits. The similarity of gods makes their names mutually translatable. But in historical reality, this correlation has to be reversed. The practice of translating the names of the gods created a concept of similarity and produced the idea or conviction that gods are international.

The tradition of translating or interpreting foreign divine names goes back to the innumerable glossaries equating Sumerian and Akkadian words, among which appear lists of divine names in two or even three languages, such as Emesal (women's language, used as a literary dialect), Sumerian, and Akkadian. The most interesting of these sources is the explanatory list *Anu sa ameli*,

which contains three columns, the first giving the Sumerian name, the second the Akkadian name, and the third the functional definition of the deity. This explanatory list gives what may be called the meaning of divine names, making explicit the principle that underlies the equation or translation of divine names. In the Kassite period of the Late Bronze Age, the lists are extended to include languages such as Amorite, Hurrian, Elamite, and Kassite in addition to Sumerian and Akkadian. In these cases, the practice of translating divine names was applied to very different cultures and religions. The origin of this practice may be identified in the field of international law. Treaties had to be sealed by solemn oaths, and the gods invoked in these oaths had to be recognized by both parties. The list of these gods conventionally closes the treaty. They necessarily had to be equivalent as to their function and in particular as to their rank. Intercultural theology became a concern of international law.

The growing political and commercial interconnectedness of the ancient world and the practice of cross-cultural translation of everything, including divine names, gradually led to the concept of a common religion. The names, iconographies, and rites—in short, the cultures—differ, but the gods are the same. This concept of religion as the common background of cultural diversity and the principle of cultural translatability eventually led to the late Hellenistic mentality, for which the names of the gods mattered little in view of the overwhelming natural evidence for their existence and presence in the world.

Hyphenating gods. Scholars conventionally refer to an Egyptian phenomenon that might be compared to the Mesopotamian technique of translating gods as syncretism. It involves the collocation of two or three different gods, leading to hyphenated names such as Amun-Re, Amun-Re-Harakhty, Ptah-Sokar-Osiris, Hathor-Tefnut, Min-Horus, Atum-Khepri, Sobek-Re, and so on. As a rule, the first name refers to the cultic/local dimension, the actual temple owner and lord of the town, whereas the second name refers to a translocal, preferably cosmic deity. Thus, Amun is the lord of Thebes, in whom the sun-god, Re, becomes manifest. Ptah is the lord of Memphis, Sokar the god of its necropolis, Osiris the god of the underworld and the dead whose Memphite representation is to be seen in Ptah-Sokar. This relationship between deities does not mean equation or fusion; the gods retain their individuality. Re does not merge into Amun or vice versa. The gods enter into a relationship of mutual determination and complementation: Re becomes the cosmic aspect of Amun, Amun the cultic and local aspect of Re; Atum refers to the nocturnal, and Khepri to the diurnal aspect of the sun-god. Hyphenation implies neither identification nor subordination; Amun has no precedence over Re, nor Re over Amun. In the course of time, however, this practice of “hyphenating” gods fosters the idea of a kind of deep structure identity.

A similar practice occurs in Greece, although with very different ramifications. A god worshiped throughout Greece, such as Artemis, may become associated with a local god whose traits are similar (thus in Arcadia we find Artemis Callisto). In these cases, however, an originally independent god—even a

god who continues to be worshiped independently in some cases—is subordinated to the Panhellenic god both in the sense that the lesser god’s altar is smaller than the greater god’s and in the sense that myth makes the lesser god a “heroic” companion of the greater god.

“*All gods are One.*” In Mesopotamia, the pantheon is structured by strong hierarchical relations of subordination, and this, in the long run, fosters similar ideas of deep structural identity. The creation epic, the *Enuma Elish*, ends with a hymn to the chief god, Marduk, calling him by fifty names. The gods who are subordinated to Marduk become his names, aspects of his all-encompassing essence. Another text assembles a group of major deities, identifying them with roles of Marduk:

Ninirta is Marduk of the hoe,
Nergal is Marduk of the attack,
Zababa is Marduk of the hand-to-hand fight,
Enlil is Marduk of lordship and counsel,
Nabium is Marduk of accounting,
Sin is Marduk, the illuminator of the night,
Shamash is Marduk of justice,
Adad is Marduk of rains.

A hymn of Assurbanipal addresses Marduk as carrying the identity of the three highest gods as personal properties: “You hold the Anu-ship, the Enlil-ship, the Ea-ship.” The culmination of these tendencies is reached when the whole pantheon comes to be seen as just aspects of one supreme god. “All gods are three,” we read in an Egyptian text (Papyrus Leiden 1.350), which moreover states that these three gods are just aspects of one god:

All gods are three:
AMUN, RE, and PTAH, whom none equals.
He who hides his name as Amun,
he appears to the face as Re,
his body is PTAH.

We easily discern here the three “dimensions” of polytheistic theology: name, cosmic appearance, and cultic “embodiment” in a statue, dwelling in a temple, ruling a city. These three dimensions, however, are encompassed and transcended by a god who is referred to as only “He.” Amun is just a name screening the true and hidden name of this god, of whom another hymn states:

People fall down immediately for fear
if his name is uttered knowingly or unknowingly.
There is no god able to call him by it.

In Egypt, this concept of a Supreme Being comprising in his essence the whole pantheon goes back to the Ramesside period (13th century BCE) and seems to

be a reaction to Akhenaten's monotheistic revolution. It stresses the oneness of god while retaining the multiplicity of the divine. In the last instance, all gods are but One, the immanent manifold manifestation and diversification of a hidden and transcendent unity.

Hypsistos: belief in a Supreme Being. The idea that the various nations worshiped basically the same deities but under different names and in different forms eventually led to the belief in a Supreme Being (the Greek expression is *Hypsistos*, the Highest One) comprising in its essence not only all the myriads of known and unknown deities, but above all those three or four gods who, in the context of different religions, play the role of the highest god (usually Zeus, Sarapis, Helios, and Iao = YHWH). This superdeity is addressed by appellations such as *Hypsistos* (Supreme) and the widespread "One-God" predication *Heis Theos*. Oracles typically proclaim particular gods to be one and the same together with other gods:

One Zeus, one Hades, one Helios, one Dionysus,
One god in all gods.

Pseudo-Justin, *Exhortation against the Greeks* 15 = Orphic frag. 239 (Macrobius, *Saturnalia* 1.18.17 quotes the first verse)

In one of these oracles, Iao, the god of the Jews, is proclaimed to be the god of time (Olam-Aion), appearing as Hades in winter, Zeus in springtime, Helios in summer, and "Habros Iao" in autumn. (Macrobius, *Saturnalia* 1.18.20; see Peterson 1926: 243-44; Hengel 1969: 476-77; and the inscription *Heis Zeüs Sérapis Iao* [CIL 2 suppl. 5665 = Dunand 1975: 170]). These oracles and predications manifest a quest for the sole and supreme divine principle beyond the innumerable multitude of specific deities. This is typical of the "ecumenical age" and seems to correspond to efforts toward political unification (see Peterson 1935, 1951; Schindler 1978; Momigliano 1987; Dunand 1975; and Fowden 1993). The belief in the Supreme Being (*Hypsistos*) has a distinctly universalist character:

The sons of Ogyges call me Bacchus,
Egyptians think me Osiris,
Mysians name me Phanaces,
Indians regard me as Dionysus,
Roman rites make me Liber,
The Arab race thinks me Adoneus,
Lucaniacus the Universal God.

Ausonius, *Epigrammata* #48 (trans. White 1985)

This tradition of invoking the Highest God by the names given him by the various nations expresses a general conviction in late antiquity about the universality of religious truth and the relativity of religious institutions and denominations and the conventionality of divine names. According to Servius, the Stoics taught that there is only one god, whose names merely differ accord-

ing to actions and offices. Varro (116–27 BCE), who knew about the Jews from Poseidonius, was unwilling to make any differentiation between Jove and YHWH because he was of the opinion that it mattered little by which name he was called as long as only the same thing was meant (“nihil interesse censens quo nomine nuncupetur, dum eadem res intelligatur”; *Antiquitates rerum divinarum*, frag. 16* Cardauns). Porphyry held the opinion that the names of the gods were purely conventional. Celsus argued that “it makes no difference whether one calls god ‘Supreme’ [*Hypsistos*] or Zeus or Adonai or Sabaoth or Ammon such as the Egyptians do or Papaïos as the Scythians.” The name does not matter when it is evident what or who is meant.

In his treatise on Isis and Osiris, Plutarch brings this general conviction to the point, stating that no one would “regard the gods as different among different nations nor as barbarian and Greek and as southern and northern. But just as the sun, moon, heaven, earth, and sea are common to all, although they are given various names by the varying nations, so it is with the one reason [*logos*] which orders these things and the one providence which has charge of them” (*On Isis and Osiris* 67.377f–378a). Seneca stressed that this conviction was based on natural evidence: “This All, which you see, which encompasses divine and human, is One, and we are but members of a great body.”

Revolutionary monotheism

Negative or counterreligion. Whereas evolutionary monotheism may be seen as the final stage of polytheism, there is no evolutionary line leading from polytheism to revolutionary monotheism. This form of monotheism manifests itself in the first place as a negative or counterreligion, defining what god is *not* and how god should *not* be worshiped. Revolutionary monotheism is based on the distinction between true and false, between one true god and the rest of forbidden, false, or nonexistent gods. The introduction of this distinction into the realm of religion constitutes a radical break. Polytheistic or “primary” religions generally are not concerned with questions of what to believe, but how to act. Not the truth of the beliefs but the correctness of the ritual performances and recitations is what matters: orthopraxy instead of orthodoxy. No primary religion is concerned with the danger of worshiping “false” gods; their concern is, rather, not to neglect any gods requiring worship.

The first to establish a revolutionary monotheism was Akhenaten of Egypt (ca. 1360–1340 BCE). Here, the negative energy of monotheism manifested itself not in explicit prohibitions (“No other gods! No images!”), but in practical destruction. The temples were closed, the cults abolished, the images destroyed, the names erased. Akhenaten’s monotheism was based on a physical discovery: the sun was found to generate not only light and warmth, but also time. Light and time were held to be sufficient principles to explain the whole phenomenology of existence; the traditional pantheon was simply deemed superfluous. Its abolition was the logical consequence of a new cosmology. Akhenaten’s monotheism was a matter not of revelation but of natural evidence. In this respect, it is closer to polytheism and to evolutionary monothe-

ism than to revolutionary monotheism in its biblical and postbiblical manifestations.

Biblical monotheism is based not on evidence but on revelation. It is not a matter of cognition but of commitment. It requires adherents to make a conscious decision to accept revealed truth and reject deceitful evidence. Natural evidence is debunked as seduction, as luring people away from revealed truth into the traps and pitfalls of the false gods, that is, the world. The distinction between true and false refers, in its ultimate meaning, to the distinction between god and world. Revolutionary monotheism worships an extramundane or transcendent god, whereas the deities of both polytheism and evolutionary monotheism create and animate the world from within and constitute its life. These religions may be termed “cosmotheism,” because they worship the world as a divine being. Biblical monotheism is based on an extramundane truth that cannot be seen or otherwise sensually experienced but only believed “with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your power,” and so is revolutionary as well.

The negative or antagonistic energy of revolutionary monotheism finds its expression, not perhaps in (f)actual history but in textual memory, in scenes of violence such as the story of the golden calf (when 3,000 men and women were cruelly executed), Elijah’s competition with the priests of Baal (when the priests were massacred), Josiah’s reform (when not only the “high places” [*bāmôt*] were destroyed but also the priests persecuted and killed), and the forced divorce under Ezra of Israelites married to Canaanites (which was a less bloody but equally violent act). This violence is not a matter of history but of semantics. However, there were always situations when textual semantics led to political action.

Canonization. Revealed truth that cannot be reexperienced in any natural way must be codified in order to be transmittable to future generations. Revolutionary monotheism appeals to memory and transmission rather than to observation, attention, divination, and diligent maintenance. In order to transmit its revolutionary message beyond the first generations of founders and followers, it must develop a body of highly normative and canonized scripture. This applies to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as well as to Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Confucianism, Daoism, and other religions of the East, all of which are based on a canon. The revolutionary break between cosmotheism and monotheism is everywhere dependent on the invention of writing. It is an “advance in intellectuality” as Freud called it, based on a new cultural technology.

The appeal to memory and the prohibition of forgetting usually assume the form of reading, learning, and interpreting. Remembering means a form of reactualization of the normative impulses as they are laid down in the canon. The texts have not only to be learned by heart but they have to be understood and followed. This implies both believing in the truth of what the texts say and the determination to organize the collective culture and the individual lifestyle according to the codified rules, laws, and norms of scripture.

Idolatry, sin, and the construction of paganism. In consequence of its deter-

mination to distinguish between true and false, revolutionary monotheism constructs the outside world of former and foreign religions as paganism, a concept completely alien to primary religions. The Greeks knew “barbarians” but no “pagans.” However, the distinction is primarily applied within the group itself; it addresses the “pagan within” and cuts right through its own community and even through the individual heart, which now becomes the theater of inner conflicts and religious dynamics. The concept of idolatry became psychologized and turned into a new concept of sin. Among the various innovations brought into the world by revolutionary monotheism, the invention of the “inner person” is of particular importance. Religion becomes a matter of the heart and soul: “The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise” (Ps. 51.19 [= 51.17 Hebrew]). “And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deut. 6.5).

The distinction between true and false religion has not only a cognitive, but also a moral meaning. In this early stage of monotheism, the “false gods” are conceived of as fully existent and powerful beings who constitute a constant temptation and lure the human heart into the pitfalls of idolatry. Idolatry is seen not only as an error but also as infidelity and immorality. Without the existence of other gods, the commandment to be faithful to the one god would have little meaning. The gods of polytheistic religions, in their need of social bonds, formed constellations within their own sphere and were not dependent on humanity. The god of the Bible is a “jealous god,” having to count on the love and loyalty of his chosen people, which inevitably fails in fulfilling his expectations. Thus, together with counterreligion, the concept of “sin” is born as the awareness of having failed in requiring God’s love and of having given in to the temptations of the false gods.

The theologization of justice. Revolutionary monotheism is a religion in which the idea of justice holds the central position. Whereas in polytheistic religions such as in Egypt, the spheres of cult and justice are carefully separated (justice is for humans, and cult is for the gods and the dead), in the Bible they are emphatically connected. God does not want sacrifice, but justice. Justice becomes the most prominent way of fulfilling the will of God. This led to the still widespread conviction that justice and morals were brought into the world only by monotheism and could not be maintained without it. The construction of paganism implies the idea of lawlessness and immorality. This is, of course, a polemical distortion. The gods, above all the sun-gods (Shamash in Mesopotamia, Re in Egypt), watched over the keeping of the laws and acted as judges. In Egypt, moreover, there is the idea of a general judgment of the dead, which constitutes a first step toward a theologization of justice. But it is true that no god other than YHWH or Allah ever acted as legislator. The idea of justice is divine, but the formulation and promulgation of specific laws is the task of the king. In Egypt, the laws were never codified, and Mesopotamia had law books but no law codes. Every new king was free to promulgate his own laws and was not bound to an existing legislation. The Torah was the first attempt at

creating a real law code not to be superseded by any future legislation. This was a revolutionary step by which the law—and with it religion itself, whose center the law constituted—became independent of any political government. The ideas of divine legislation, and not only codification but also revelation and canonization, are closely connected. The law formed the content of the Sinai revelation, and its codification in the various law codes in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy formed the core of the evolving canon.

Bibliography

- Dunand, F. “Les syncrétismes dans la religion de l’Égypte gréco-romaine.” In *Les syncrétismes dans les religions de l’antiquité*, ed. F. Dunand and P. Levêque. Études préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l’empire romain 46. Leiden: Brill, 1975.
- Fowden, Garth. *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993.
- Hengel, M. *Judentum und Hellenismus: Studien zu ihrer Begegnung unter besonderer Berücksichtigung Palästinas bis zur Mitte des 2. Jh. v. Chr.* Tübingen: Mohr, 1969.
- Momigliano, Arnaldo. “The Disadvantages of Monotheism for a Universal State.” In Momigliano, *On Pagans, Jews, and Christians*. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1987.
- Peterson, E. *Heis Theos: Epigraphische, formgeschichtliche und religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchungen*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1926.
- . *Monotheismus als politisches Problem*. Leipzig: Hegner, 1935.
- . *Theologische Traktate*. Munich: Kösel, 1951.
- Porter, Barbara Nevling, ed. *One God or Many? Concepts of Divinity in the Ancient World*. [Chebeague, Maine:] Casco Bay Assyriological Institute, 2000.
- Schindler, Alfred, ed. *Monotheismus als politisches Problem: Erik Peterson und die Kritik der politischen Theologie*. Studien zur evangelischen Ethik 14. Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1978.
- Van Seters, J. *In Search of History: Historiography in the Ancient World and the Origins of Biblical History*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983.
- White, H. G. E., ed. and trans. *Ausonius*. 2 vols. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985.

Cosmology: Time and History

John J. Collins

*A*ccording to Greek tradition, Pythagoras “was the first to call the sum of the whole by the name of the cosmos, because of the order which it displayed” (Aetius 2.1.1). Cosmology, strictly speaking, is the rational discussion of the cosmos, which developed in Greece from the 6th century BCE onward. The word is used more loosely to refer to any discussion of the nature and coherence of the world. Such discussion can be found long before the beginnings of Greek science and philosophy in the myths of the ancient Near East, especially those that dealt with cosmogony or creation.

Creation myths

It is important to bear in mind that ancient religion was not dogmatic or systematic in the manner of later Western faiths. There were no creeds to which everyone subscribed. There were several creation myths in ancient Egypt. Each city that rose to power formulated its own myth of creation. In the cosmogony of Heliopolis, the creator-god was Atum; in Memphis, Ptah; in Hermopolis and Thebes, Amun. Each cosmogony, however, had only one creator-god, and he was credited with giving life to the gods as well as to humanity. The sun-god Re appears in almost every creation account, and his name is often joined with that of other creators (Amun-Re, Re-Atum). The actual process of creation was conceived by human analogy. One model supposed that the origin of life came from the creator’s semen. In the Heliopolitan cosmogony, Atum generated the first divine couple from himself, either by masturbation or by spitting. Another model associated the creative power with the utterance of a word. In the Memphite Theology, Ptah creates “through what the heart plans and the tongue commands.” A third model, based on the work of an artisan, was exemplified by the potter-god Khnum. Life was often thought to have originated on a primeval mound, which emerged when the primeval flood receded.

These Egyptian creation myths are remarkable for the lack of conflict in the process. Egyptian history did not lack conflict, but the myths projected a sense of stability and permanence. This stability was expressed in the concept of *ma'at*, an all-embracing principle of order that governed all aspects of nature and society. A creator-god such as Ptah and Atum was "lord of *ma'at*." *Ma'at* was sometimes portrayed as a goddess, Maat, the daughter of the sun-god Re, who accompanied him as he sailed across the sky. The sovereignty of the creator-god had its counterpart on earth in the rule of the pharaoh. The conflict often encountered by the monarchy was acknowledged in the myth of Osiris and Seth, but this myth too ended in stability. The evil Seth was defeated by Horus, the posthumous heir of Osiris, who then became king on earth. The living pharaoh was the embodiment of Horus, while the dead king, Osiris, was ruler of the netherworld.

In contrast to the Egyptian creation myths, those of the Semitic world were stories of conflict. The best known of these myths is the Babylonian *Enuma Elish*, which casts Marduk, god of Babylon, in the role of creator. More precisely, it distinguishes two stages in creation. In the beginning was a primordial couple, Apsu and Tiamat, often understood to represent freshwater and salt-water respectively, although this distinction is not explicit in the myth. The mingling of their waters produces the other gods. The creation of the world is a separate process. The young gods kill their father Apsu, but are then endangered by the wrath of Tiamat. Marduk is the hero who does single combat with Tiamat and kills her. In return, he is made king of the gods. From the carcass of Tiamat he creates the world: He split her like a shellfish into two parts. Half of her he set up as a sky and posted guards to make sure that her waters did not escape. He further fixed the astral likenesses of the gods in the sky and determined the months and the year. Finally he made humanity, from the blood of Qingu, an ally of Tiamat, to serve the gods. Another Mesopotamian myth, Atrahasis, describes a different occasion and process for the creation of humanity, involving a mixture of the blood of a god with clay. The political overtones of the Babylonian myth are transparent. If the gods need a strong monarchy in order to ward off danger, so too does Babylon.

We do not have a story of the creation of the world from Syria or Canaan. The god El is called father and is said to have begotten other deities. We might infer that creation was conceived as a form of procreation. The closest analogues to *Enuma Elish* in the Ugaritic literature are found in the myths of Baal. These myths describe combat between Baal and Yam (Sea) in one episode and between Baal and Mot (Death) in another. What is at stake is the kingship of the gods, under El. These myths are often viewed as cosmogonic, on the grounds that they establish order in the universe. Support for this view comes not only from the analogy with the *Enuma Elish* but from the frequent association of creation with the defeat of a monster in biblical poetry (e.g., Job 26; Ps. 89.10 [= 89.11 Hebrew]). These combat myths suggest that creation, or the order of the cosmos, is fragile and has to be reestablished periodically in the face of recurring dangers.

The canonical account of creation in the Bible (Gen. 1) is closer in spirit to the Egyptian myths where a sovereign creator creates by his word, unhindered by any opposition. (This is not necessarily to posit Egyptian influence. There is some evidence that the biblical writers were deliberately rejecting the Babylonian account of creation, as they use the word *têhôm*, cognate of Tiamat, to refer to the deep without personification.)

Tales of primeval conflict are also found in Hittite (Anatolian) mythology (*ANET* 120–28). One such myth tells how Kumarbi attacked the king of heaven (Anu) and bit off and swallowed his “manhood.” As a result he became pregnant with three dreadful gods, including the storm-god. The end of the myth is fragmentary, but it is likely that Kumarbi was eventually challenged for the kingship by the storm-god. In another myth, the Song of Ullikummi, Kumarbi rebels against Teshub, the storm-god. In this myth, Kumarbi impregnates a rock and fathers a giant, Ullikummi, who wreaks havoc on heaven and on earth. Eventually, the giant is crippled by the god Ea. This myth tells us incidentally that the gods severed heaven from earth with a cleaver. Yet another Hittite myth tells of a battle between the storm-god and a dragon, Illuyanka.

Greek mythology provides no comprehensive creation myth such as we have in the *Enuma Elish*. Hesiod synthesizes a range of mythological traditions in his *Theogony*. In the beginning was Chaos (a yawning void). Then came Earth, Tartarus (a terrible place beneath Hades), and Eros. From Chaos came Erebus (a dark region between Earth and the netherworld) and Night. Of Night were born Aether and Day. Then Earth brought forth Heaven and the Sea. Then she lay with Heaven and bore numerous gods. In contrast to Near Eastern mythologies, Earth is begotten, not made. While it is not clear how Earth, Tartarus, and Eros emerge from Chaos, the later stages of creation are explicitly sexual. While Heaven and Earth are not absolutely primordial, they are the progenitors of the great majority of the gods. Heaven (Uranus) is father of Cronus, who in turn is father of Zeus, the eventual supreme god. Hesiod has his own combat myth: the conflict between Zeus and the Titans and Typhon, which ends with Zeus’s confirmation as king of the gods. This conflict is not related to the creation of the world, however (see further Myth). The primeval character of Earth in Hesiod is consonant with the view of later Greek philosophers such as Aristotle that the world is eternal. This view was sharply at variance with the prevalent belief in creation in the ancient Near East. According to Hesiod’s *Works and Days*, the gods made the first human beings in the time of Cronus.

A quite different account of the origin of the world was proposed by Plato in his dialogue the *Timaeus*. Plato reasoned that the world must be created since it is visible and tangible, and all sensible things are in a process of change. The creator, whom he calls simply “god,” desired that all things should be good and nothing bad and therefore made the world as perfect as possible. Accordingly, the cosmos became a living creature, endowed with soul and intelligence, and may even be called a god itself. Because of its perfection, it was imperishable. The emphasis on the goodness of creation is reminiscent of the biblical account in Gen. 1 and made the *Timaeus* attractive to later Jewish and Chris-

tian philosophers. Plato's creator is a craftsman, a *dēmiourgos*, like many of the creator-gods of the Near East. As in the myths, creation is not fashioned out of nothing. Where the myths began with unformed matter, or the biblical "waste and void," Plato posited invisible and formless space. Plato's idea of creation, however, was exceptional in the Greek world. Aristotle was more typical in regarding the cosmos as a self-contained whole, ungenerated and imperishable. Moreover, there is always some question as to how Plato intended his myths to be understood.

Plato's view that the initial creation was good was fully in keeping with the ancient creation myths. Hesiod provides several explanations for evil in the course of his *Theogony* and *Works and Days* (e.g., Pandora's jar). Only the Persian Zoroastrians, however, attempted to account for evil in the cosmogony itself. In their account, two opposing cosmic entities existed from the beginning: Ahura Mazda (Ohrmazd), the wise lord who was god of light, and Angra Mainyu (Ahriman), the god of darkness. These gods struggled throughout history. In a variant of this myth, the opposing gods were twin offspring of one supreme good god. The idea of a devil or Satan, which appears in Judaism in the Hellenistic period and became very influential in Christianity, was probably of Persian origin. The influence of the Persian myth can also be seen in the Jewish Dead Sea Scrolls, which say that God created two spirits to govern humanity, one of light and one of darkness.

The view of the world

Throughout the eastern Mediterranean world and Near East, the basic view of the world in the earliest literature is tripartite, distinguishing heaven, earth, and netherworld. The Egyptians variously described the heavenly realm as a bird, a cow, a woman (the goddess Nut, balancing on her feet and hands), or a flat plane held up by pillars. The sun-god Re was thought to traverse the heaven by day and then journey back to the east through the netherworld at night. After death, the soul or spirit had to encounter various dangers in the netherworld, but the righteous person might hope to ascend to a blessed life, either on earth or in heaven. The blessed abode of the dead is often called the Field of Rushes or Field of Offerings. It is far removed from everyday human life, but different texts seem to imply a location in the heavens or at the ends of the earth. The hope of the righteous was also expressed in terms of joining the stars and mingling with the gods in heaven.

In Mesopotamia, too, heaven was the abode of the gods (there were also gods of the netherworld). Human beings, however, were restricted to the netherworld after death, and this was a gloomy place. The futility of the quest for immortality is the theme of the Epic of Gilgamesh. The quest takes the hero to the ends of the earth to the abode of Utnapishtim, the flood hero, who had been granted eternal life. The myth of Adapa, in contrast, tells of the ascent of its hero to heaven, where he is offered eternal life, but rejects it because of the

advice given him by the god Ea. The legend of Etana also tells of an attempt to ascend to heaven, which apparently ended in failure. The general principle held true: heaven was for the gods, humanity lived on earth and descended to the netherworld after death. There is also some evidence in Mesopotamian traditions for multiple heavens, but these had no effect on human destiny.

The most important Mesopotamian contribution to the study of the cosmos was in the areas of astrology and astronomy. The Babylonians looked to the stars for clues to the intentions of the gods. The practice of astrology implied that the movements of the stars and human affairs were interconnected, as indeed were other phenomena on earth, such as the flight of birds. But the Babylonians also developed more scientific forms of astronomy, both by observation and by mathematical calculation. There was no clear distinction between astrology and astronomy. The movements of the stars were thought to be significant for events on earth. The term *Chaldean*, which originally referred to a tribe that rose to power in Babylon, was used to designate astrologers in the Hellenistic and Roman periods.

Neither Syria nor Israel contributed much to the study of the stars. Astrology was discouraged in biblical tradition because of the temptation to worship the host of heaven, although there is evidence that some Jews practiced astrology in the Hellenistic and Roman periods. Here again the world was usually seen as tripartite. In both Canaan and Israel, heaven was the abode of the heavenly host, while dead human beings descended to a gloomy netherworld. There is some evidence that exceptional individuals, including kings, might hope for immortal life with the gods. The Bible allowed that a few individuals (Enoch, Elijah) had been taken up alive to heaven. But such cases were exceptional. The stars were the heavenly host, divine or angelic beings, who were sometimes thought to intervene in human affairs.

The earliest Greek conceptions of the cosmos were very much like those of the ancient Near East. The earth was a flat circular surface, surrounded by the river Oceanus. The sky was a disk of comparable size above it, held up by pillars guarded by Atlas (so Homer) or by Atlas himself (Hesiod). The gods were variously said to live on Mount Olympus or in the aether above the sky. The dead went down to Hades, beneath the depths of the earth, where there was no joy.

Beginning in the 6th century, however, Greek cosmology was transformed by several developments that would have long-lasting consequences far beyond the borders of Greece.

First of these was the rise of a new approach to cosmology, pioneered by the pre-Socratic philosophers. This approach favored explanations in terms of matter, without positing divine interventions. Even when the philosophers spoke of gods, they were not anthropomorphic in the manner of the myths, but rather represented aspects of the cosmos. Of course the demise of the gods was neither immediate nor complete, even in the domain of Greek philosophy, as can be seen from the *Timaeus* of Plato. Plato not only defended the idea of a creator, but argued that the world had a soul and bitterly attacked the materi-

alistic view of the universe put forward by some philosophers. Other Greek thinkers, such as the Stoics, dispensed with the creator and regarded the universe itself as divine. The Stoics supposed that the universe was animated by Pneuma (Spirit) or Logos (Reason), a fine fiery substance that represented the active element in humanity as well as in nature. These Hellenistic concepts provided a way of reconceiving older Near Eastern ideas. Egyptian *ma'at* and Israelite wisdom were traditional concepts of cosmic order. Jewish Hellenistic writings such as those of Philo show how such concepts could be given Platonic or Stoic overtones in the Hellenistic period. Even those such as Jews and Christians, who insisted on a creator-god and therefore found Plato more congenial than they found the Stoics, reconceived their understanding of deity in terms that were more cosmological and less anthropomorphic. In Hellenistic Judaism, wisdom or spirit was considered to be the divine element in the universe, which pointed beyond itself to a creator. In Stoic theology, the cosmos, animated by spirit, was itself the deity.

The development of Greek astronomy led to a new view of the universe, significantly more complex than the old three-tiered model. Pythagoras held that the earth and the heavenly bodies were spheres moving in harmony. Plato accepted the idea that the earth was a sphere and supposed that the moon, sun, planets, and fixed stars revolved around it in their own orbits (*Republic* 10. 616–17; cf. *Timaeus* 36–39). With some variations, this model became widespread in the Hellenistic period and later. Cicero, in the *Dream of Scipio*, posited nine spheres. The outermost, the starry heaven, contains the whole and is itself the supreme god. Beneath it are seven other spheres: Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, Sun, Venus, Mercury, and Moon. The ninth and central sphere, the earth, is immovable and lowest of all. The model of the geocentric universe, with various refinements, was given its classical expression by Claudius Ptolemy of Alexandria in the 2nd century CE. The attempt of Aristarchus of Samos in the 3rd century BCE to argue for a heliocentric universe had little impact.

This new view of the universe is reflected in the Near Eastern cultures in various ways, primarily in the belief in multiple heavens. An Egyptian depiction of the cosmos from the Ptolemaic era shows the goddess Nut bending over the world not once but twice. Jewish and later Christian apocalypses tell of visionaries ascending through multiple heavens, typically seven, but sometimes three and occasionally other numbers. These visionary texts are not concerned with scientific cosmology, but they reflect the assumptions of their time about the general shape of the universe.

Related to the interest in multiple heavens was the belief that the righteous dead lived on in heaven with the stars. The epitaph of soldiers fallen at the Battle of Potidaea in 432 BCE says that the aether had received their souls, the earth their bodies (*IG I³ 1179*). The idea of heavenly immortality was given philosophical nuance by Hellenistic philosophers, who associated the aether, or upper heavenly regions, with the finest, most divine substance. Eastern peoples related it to their own traditional beliefs. In Jewish apocalypses, astral immortality meant joining the host of heaven or the angels. In the Hellenistic

period, even Hades was often located in the heavens. The new view of the world had no logical place for an underworld, although the old beliefs lived on in popular religion. Plato's pupil, Heracleides Ponticus, is said to have claimed that the Milky Way was the path of souls passing through Hades in the heaven. Jewish and Christian apocalypses located the torments of the damned as well as the joy of the blessed in the heavenly regions.

Celestial eschatology tended to imply a negative view of the earthly regions. The soul was weighed down by bodily existence and was liberated to rise up after death. This tendency was taken to an extreme conclusion in late antiquity in the gnostic cosmologies that saw the creator or demiurge as an evil figure and that represented the creation of the material world as a fall. The material world was then viewed as an evil place from which souls had to be saved by enlightenment and ascent to the realm of spirit. This late antique view of the world had come full circle from the insistence of the Bible and of Plato that both the creator and the creation were very good.

Time and history

The ancient creation myths had implications for the understanding of time and history, although they did not devote much explicit reflection to them. The heavenly bodies were seen to regulate time. When Marduk fixed the stars in the *Enuma Elish*, he established the months and the years. In the biblical account, the world was created in six days so that God could rest on the Sabbath, completing the week. According to Plato, who was vastly more systematic in his reflections, time and the heaven came into being at the same instant. The sun, moon, and planets were created in order to distinguish and preserve the numbers of time. The myths generally implied a cyclic view of history. They described not only the beginning of things, but paradigmatic events that could be reenacted over and over. For the Egyptians, each sunrise recapitulated the establishment of *ma'at*. For the Israelites, historical events such as the Exodus or the return from the Babylonian Exile were reenactments of the victory of the creator over the chaos dragon. From early times, Egyptians and Babylonians were aware that all the planets revolved. Plato formalized the idea of a Great Year—the period of time that it takes for the sun, moon, and five planets to complete their rotations and return simultaneously to the same positions in relation to the fixed stars. Plato suggested that the revolving Great Years were punctuated by periodic disasters of fire and flood, which were reflected in Greek mythology in the stories of the fall of Phaethon while driving the chariot of the sun and the myth of Deucalion. The Stoic doctrine of *ekpyrōsis* (conflagration) also involved the periodic return of all things to the primal substance and their subsequent renewal.

It was axiomatic in the ancient world that gods could intervene in human affairs and implement their plans in history. Mesopotamian rulers often attributed their rise to power to the plan of their patron deity. Homer's gods acted

purposefully, even if they were often at odds with each other. In most cases, these divine plans concerned limited episodes. The biblical accounts of the role of YHWH in the history of Israel are exceptional in their scope, spanning several generations. Moreover, the opening chapters of Genesis provide an account of early universal history, which forms a backdrop for the emergence of Israel. Nonetheless, the biblical story of Israel stops well short of providing a comprehensive view of all history. Such a view emerges only in the apocalyptic writings of the Hellenistic period. In the Greco-Roman world, the best analogue to the early biblical history is found in Vergil's *Aeneid*, which describes the emergence of Rome as the culmination of an epic history under divine guidance.

Hesiod's myth of the successive ages of humanity, in his *Works and Days*, is important for the emergence of a concept of universal history. It is quite possible that the poet is adapting a myth of Median or Persian origin, but this is difficult to establish because of the notorious difficulty of dating the Persian sources. Hesiod (*Works and Days* 109–196) enumerates five ages: first the golden, then the silver, then the bronze. The fourth is not defined by a metal, but is that of “the godlike race of heroes who are called demigods, the race before our own.” The fifth age is that of iron, of which Hesiod says that he wishes he had either died before or been born afterward. Since he allows that something will come afterward, some people have supposed that he expected a return to the golden age, but Hesiod does not say this. He leaves the future open. The return to a golden age is suggested much later in Vergil's Fourth *Eclogue*, which refers to a “last age” predicted by the Cumean Sibyl.

The division of history into epochs or *saecula* was developed by the Etruscans and taken over by the Romans. A natural *saeculum* was the highest age a human being could attain (approximately one hundred years). A civil *saeculum* began with the founding of a city or state and lasted as long as any member of the founding generation lived. The end of a *saeculum*, however, was not always obvious and had to be inferred from signs given by the gods. Ten *saecula* were allotted to the Etruscan people, after which they would disappear. In the mid-1st century BCE there was speculation about what point in the process had been reached. On one interpretation, a comet that appeared after the murder of Julius Caesar marked the end of the ninth *saeculum* and the beginning of the tenth. The grammarian Servius (4th century CE) said that the “last age” of Vergil's Fourth *Eclogue* was the tenth. Whether this final age should be understood in the context of Etruscan speculation is disputed.

The most elaborate division of history into periods in antiquity was that of the Zoroastrians. The classic form of their theology of history is found in the Middle Persian *Bundahishn*. According to this theology, the two opposing primordial spirits, Ahura Mazda and Ahriman, coexisted for three thousand years before the creation of the world in its physical state. Thereafter world history would last for nine thousand years, divided into three periods of three

thousand years each. The first three thousand would pass according to the will of Ahura Mazda, and the second three thousand would be a mixture, governed by both gods. The third period is divided into three distinct millennia. The end of each millennium is marked by tribulations and disasters, followed by the coming of a new savior. The final battle would be fought at the end of the third period. The final millennium is further divided into periods. The *Bahman Yasht* reports a vision by Zarathustra of a tree with four metallic branches, gold, silver, steel, and mixed iron. These are interpreted as representing four historical periods. A variant of this vision, also in the *Bahman Yasht*, lists the ages as seven in number.

The Persian texts are preserved in Pahlavi manuscripts from the 6th to 9th centuries CE, but the division of history into periods is certainly much older than this. Plutarch, writing around the late 1st or early 2nd century CE, gives an elliptical account of the myth, which he derived from Theopompus (early 4th century BCE). One god would dominate the other and be dominated for three thousand years. For another three thousand they would fight and make war. In the end the evil power would be destroyed. It is not clear whether this is a somewhat garbled form of the myth known from later sources or whether it represents a different division of history. It is clear in any case that the division of history into millennia was known in Persian tradition before the Hellenistic age. Some scholars have supposed that the Persian tradition of four ages symbolized by metals, attested in the *Bahman Yasht*, underlies Hesiod's schema of four declining ages. Such a proposal is difficult to verify because of the late date of the Persian sources, but this kind of periodization is an integral part of Persian cosmology, while it is exceptional in Greek tradition.

In Jewish apocalyptic writings of the Hellenistic period, history is sometimes divided into ten generations, a schema most probably derived from the Persian millennium. This division is frequently found in the Jewish and Christian Sibylline Oracles. So, for example, in Sibylline Oracles books 1–2 history is divided into ten generations, punctuated by the flood in the fifth generation and culminating with a conflagration. These oracles sometimes incorporated the work of pagan Sibyls, and so the question arises whether the tenfold division of history was a feature of the Sibylline genre outside Judaism. The only evidence for this, however, is Servius's interpretation of Vergil's last age as the tenth, in the 4th century CE. The evidence suggests that the use of Sibylline Oracles to provide a comprehensive overview of history was a Jewish adaptation of the genre.

Other schematizations of history were also popular in Jewish and Christian tradition, notably the sevenfold division derived from the days of creation or from the idea of a sabbath. Christian writers such as Lactantius in the early 4th century CE held that the world was in the 6th and final millennium of its history. Lactantius drew on a wide range of ancient philosophical and mythical speculations about the cosmos, including the late Persian Oracle of Hystaspes, a work that has sometimes been regarded as Jewish. The syncretistic character

of late antiquity is shown by the difficulty of distinguishing Persian, Jewish, and other traditions in texts such as this.

Cosmic eschatology

The periodization of history is closely related to the expectation of an end of history or of the world. Ancient Near Eastern myths, such as the *Enuma Elish*, saw the establishment of kingship as the end of a process. Insofar as one might speak of a goal in history, it was the establishment of a definitive, lasting kingship. In the Bible, this was provided by the Davidic dynasty, which was supposed to last forever. When the Judean monarchy was dissolved by the Babylonians in the 6th century, hopes for the future focused on the restoration of the Davidic line. Sometimes this was expected to usher in a virtual golden age (e.g., Isa. 11.6: "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb"). A Babylonian prophecy from the 6th century BCE speaks of a king who would rule the entire world and whose dynasty would stand forever and exercise authority like the gods. Later, Vergil's *Aeneid* promised Rome an *imperium* without end, and the Fourth *Eclogue* described the transformation of the earth.

One widespread motif relating to the hope for definitive kingship envisioned a sequence of four kingdoms and a fifth. Herodotus noted a sequence of empires in Asia: Assyrians, Medes, Persians. Since the Medes never ruled in the West, this sequence is probably of Persian origin and viewed the Persians as the final, definitive empire. In the Hellenistic era, the sequence was extended to include Macedonia and finally Rome. This schema could be used in the interests of imperial propaganda, but it could also be used for subversive purposes. In the *Bahman Yasht*, the fourth kingdom is identified as "the *divs* with disheveled hair," an unflattering reference to the Greeks. The implication of the vision is that this kingdom will be overthrown at the end of the millennium. The Jewish Book of Daniel is more explicit. Daniel sees a statue made of different metals representing a declining series of kingdoms. (This vision is closer to the *Bahman Yasht* than to Hesiod, insofar as the final kingdom is a mixture of iron and clay.) In the end, the statue is destroyed by a stone representing the Kingdom of God, which presumably would be represented on earth by a Jewish kingdom.

The classic expressions of cosmic eschatology are found in Jewish and Christian apocalypses. The Hebrew prophets had spoken metaphorically of the end of the world in describing the destruction of specific places. Beginning in the 2nd century BCE, however, such language is used more literally. The Apocalypse of Weeks in *1 Enoch* says that at a fixed point in the future the world will be written down for destruction, and the old heaven will be taken away and replaced with a new one. The apocalypse of *4 Ezra*, written at the end of the 1st century CE, provides for a period of primeval silence between the destruction of the old world and the new creation and resurrection of the dead. The Book of Revelation in the New Testament also predicts the destruc-

tion of this world and the creation of a new one. Revelation provides for a thousand-year reign on earth for the just before the new creation. The popular use of the word *millennialism* is derived from this motif in Revelation. The motif of a final millennium in history, however, had older roots in Persian tradition.

The final conflict in apocalypses such as Daniel and Revelation has much in common with the old creation myths of the ancient Near East. In Revelation, the angel Michael casts a dragon down from heaven, and there are also beasts on land and sea. In the new creation, the sea (which was personified in the old Canaanite myths) is no more. In these texts, imagery that was used in the myths to describe the beginnings of the cosmos are projected into the future, to describe its consummation. It is likely, however, that the apocalyptic view of history is also influenced by Persian tradition. In the Zoroastrian myth, each of the last three millennia is characterized by tribulations and disasters, followed by the coming of a new savior. At the end of the final millennium, those who are still alive will not die, and those who are dead will be raised in a general resurrection. The wicked are purified in streams of fire as part of the purification of the world. After the conflagration, all things will be made new.

The hope for resurrection at the end of a predetermined historical sequence first appears in Jewish tradition in the apocalypses of Enoch and Daniel in the Hellenistic period. The Zoroastrian myth was certainly current before this time. The most complete reflection of the Persian account of the last things in Jewish or Christian tradition is found in the Christian author Lactantius in the 4th century CE. Lactantius synthesized various traditions in his writings and incorporated lengthy passages from the Oracle of Hystaspes.

Greek tradition usually viewed the world as imperishable, despite periodic destructions by fire and water. This was true even for Plato, despite his affirmation of creation. Even Hellenized Jews, most notably Philo of Alexandria, allowed that the world may be made immortal by the providence of God, even though it is by nature destructible. The notion of cosmic conflagration (*ekpyrōsis*) held a prominent but controversial place in Stoic thought. The *ekpyrōsis* would purify the cosmos, but would not entail a judgment. Stoics disputed among themselves whether it would be followed by *palingenesia*, renewed birth and repetition of all things. The Roman Seneca, writing in the 1st century CE, spoke of the time when the world would extinguish itself in order to renew itself again. Stars would collide, and all matter would burn with a single fire. Seneca claimed support for these ideas from Berossus, a Babylonian priest who presented Babylonian tradition in Greek in the early Hellenistic period. According to Seneca, Berossus said that these things would happen in accordance with the course of the stars and even predicted the time of the conflagration. The idea of cosmic conflagration is not attested in Akkadian sources, however, and seems to have no basis in Babylonian tradition.

A rare example of cosmic eschatology in the Egyptian tradition is found in the late Apocalypse of Asclepius, which is written in Greek and associated with the Hermetic corpus. This apocalypse retains some of the characteristics of po-

litical oracles. An evil age is caused by the invasion of foreigners, and this is followed by a radical transformation of the earth. It differs from earlier Egyptian tradition by envisioning a destruction of the world by fire and flood and then its restitution to its pristine state. It reflects the syncretism of late antiquity, where ideas circulated widely and the coherence of cosmos and history was widely assumed.

Bibliography

- Clifford, R. J. *Creation Accounts in the Ancient Near East and in the Bible*. Washington, D.C.: Catholic Biblical Association, 1994.
- Cohn, N. *Cosmos, Chaos, and the World to Come: The Ancient Roots of Apocalyptic Faith*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993.
- Collins, J. J., ed. *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, vol. 1: *The Origins of Apocalypticism in Judaism and Christianity*. New York: Continuum, 1998 (esp. essays by A. Hultgård and H. Cancik on Persian and Greco-Roman traditions).
- Couliano (Culianu), I. P. *Expériences de l'extase: Extase, ascension et récit visionnaire de l'hellénisme au moyen âge*. Paris: Payot, 1984.
- Wright, J. E. *The Early History of Heaven*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Wright, M. R. *Cosmology in Antiquity*. London: Routledge, 1995.