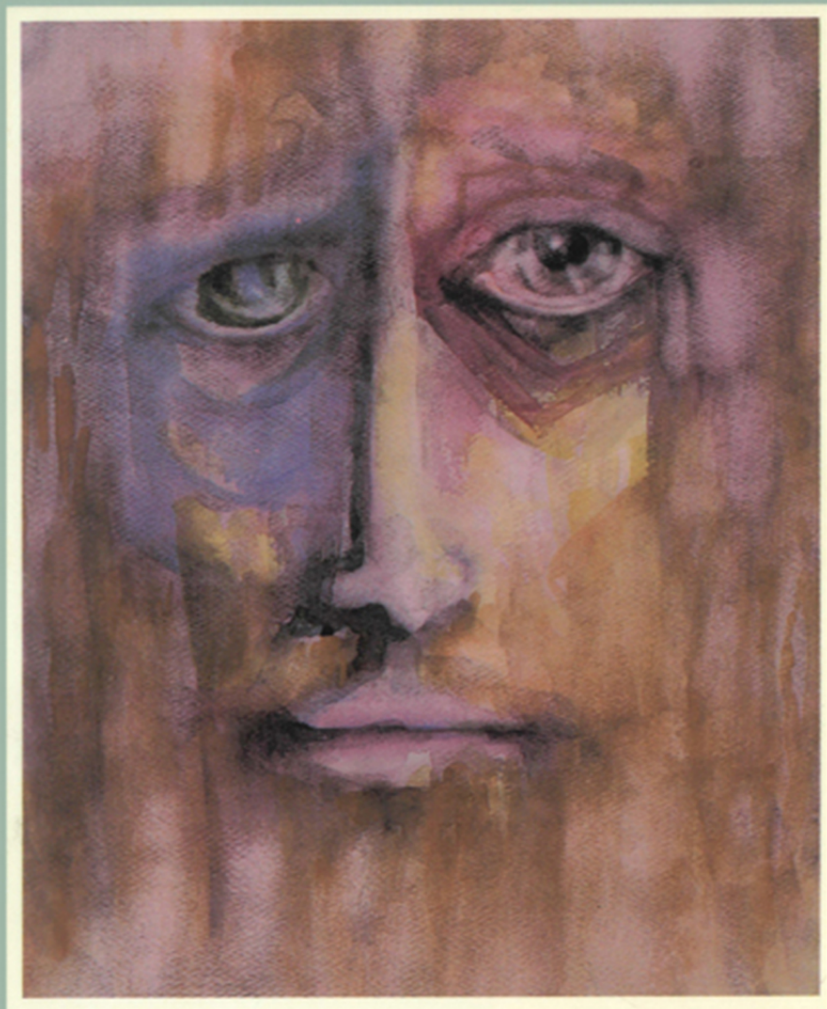# ANCIENT JUDAISM

Irving M. Zeitlin

Ancient Judaism

Ancient Judaism

*Biblical Criticism
from Max Weber to the present*

Irving M. Zeitlin

POLITY PRESS

Contents

Acknowledgement

Preface

Max Weber was among the first to recognize in ancient Judaism the roots of Western rationalism. The ancient Israelites had made the first strides in 'disenchanting' the West; they had thereby set in motion the long process of creating the ideological framework for the modern world. The relation of Israel to its God was unique in that Yahweh was said to have concluded a covenant with the Israelites. On this the oldest traditions were in agreement. Because of this unique historical event and Israel's special relation to God, this people stood in contrast to all others. Neither in the surrounding world nor in its farthest corners was anything like this special relation to be found. To understand the Weber thesis in this regard, we must review his brilliant comparative analyses of religion East and West.

In China, for example, magic and animism were not only tolerated, they were systematized so as to become an integral element of daily life. It is true that the Confucian literati were 'this worldly' to a notable degree; yet they not only tolerated magic as a means of taming the masses, they themselves believed in the efficacy of magic. Under these circumstances it is understandable why they never waged war against the magicians, never strove to uproot magical beliefs and practices from Chinese culture.[1]

In India as well, magico-religious practices prevailed. Indian religion had led to an extreme devaluation of the world and to a contemplative flight from it. Thus, India, like China, remained an 'enchanted garden' with all sorts of fetishism, animistic and magical beliefs and practices – spirits in rivers, ponds and mountains, highly developed word formulae, finger-pointing magic and the like. In contrast to the Hebrew prophets,

---

[1] Max Weber, *The Religion of China*, trs. and ed. Hans H. Gerth (Glencoe, Illinois, The Free Press, 1951).

who never made peace with the magicians, the Brahmins (a cultivated, genteel stratum like the Mandarins), in the interest of their power position, not only acknowledged the influence of magic but made numerous concessions to the unclassical magicians.

The general character of Asian religion, Weber concluded, was a form of gnosis – that is, knowledge in the spiritual realm, mystically acquired. Gnosis was the single path to the 'highest holiness' and the 'highest practice'. This knowledge, writes Weber,

> is not a rational implement of empirical science such as made possible the
> rational domination of nature and man as in the Occident. Rather it is the
> means of mystical and magical domination over the self and the world. . . .
> It is attained by an intensive training of body and spirit, either through
> asceticism, or, and as a rule, through strict, methodologically-ruled
> meditation.[2]

The gnostic doctrine gave rise to a redemption aristocracy, for such mystical knowledge was necessarily esoteric and charismatic, hence not accessible or communicable to everyone. The holy and the god-like were attained by an 'emptying' of the experience of this world. Psychic peace, not restlessness, was god-like. Asiatic religion, placing no emphasis on 'this life', led to a pronounced other-worldliness. That this magical, anti-rational view of the world had a profound impact on every aspect of an individual's conduct could not be doubted. Magic was employed to achieve every conceivable objective.

There were 'spells against enemies, erotic or economic competition, spells designed to win legal cases, spiritual spells . . . for forced fulfilment against the debtor, spells for the securing of wealth, for the success of [all sorts of] undertakings'.[3] The depth and tenacity of the magical mentality created conditions in which the 'lust for gain' never gave rise to a western type of capitalism. Notably absent from Asiatic religion was a development which in the West had broken the hold of magic over people's minds and engendered a 'rational', this-worldly ethic. The beginning of that historical process was to be traced to ancient Israel. It was there that a highly rational, religious ethic had originated. This ethic 'was free of magic and all forms of irrational quest for salvation; it was inwardly worlds apart from the paths of salvation offered by Asiatic religions. To a large extent this ethic still underlies [the]

---

[2] Max Weber, *The Religion of India*, trs. and ed. Hans H. Gerth and Don Martindale (Glencoe, Illinois, The Free Press, 1958), p. 331.
[3] Ibid., p. 336.

contemporary Middle Eastern and European ethic. World-historical interest in Jewry rests upon this fact.'[4]

Originating in the teachings of Moses and the prophets, the new ethic rested on the distinctive relation of Israel to its God, expressed and guaranteed in a unique historical event – the conclusion of a covenant with Yahweh. The prophets and other devout Hebrews always hearkened back to that great, miraculous event in which God had kept his promise, intervened in history, and liberated the Hebrews from Egyptian bondage. That was proof not only of God's power but of the absolute dependability of his promises.

Israel, then, as the other party to the covenant mediated by Moses, owed a lasting debt of gratitude to serve and to worship the lord of the universe and to follow his laws strictly. This rational relationship, unknown elsewhere, created an ethical obligation so binding that Jewish tradition regarded 'defection from Yahweh as an especially fatal abonimation'.[5] Furthermore, the markedly rational nature of this relationship lay in the worldly character of God's promises to Israel. Not some supernatural paradise was promised but 'that they would have numerous descendants, so that the people should become numerous as the sand of the seashore, and that they should triumph over all enemies, enjoy rain, rich harvests, and secure possessions.'[6]

What God offered, writes Weber, was 'salvation from Egyptian bondage, not from a senseless world out of joint. He promised not transcendent values but dominion over Canaan, which one was out to conquer, and a good life.'[7]

If the nation or an individual suffered and God failed to help, that was a sign that some commandment has been violated. Which one? Irrational means of divination could not answer that question, only a knowledge of the laws and a soul-searching scrutiny of one's conduct. The idea of the covenant had thus led to a comparatively rational mode of raising and answering such questions. Hence prophets and priests alike 'turned with great sharpness against soothsayers, augurs, day-choosers, interpretors of signs, [and] conjurors of the dead, defining their ways ... as characteristically pagan.'[8]

In that way the devout Hebrews initiated the process of breaking

[4] Max Weber, *Ancient Judaism*, trs. and ed. Hans H. Gerth and Don Martindale (Glencoe, Illinois, The Free Press, 1952), p. 4.
[5] Ibid., p. 119.
[6] Ibid., p. 119.
[7] Ibid., p. 126.
[8] Ibid., p. 167.

magic's hold upon the world. In so doing, they 'created the basis for our modern science and technology, and for capitalism'.[9]

Why modern capitalism had developed first in the West was a central and lifelong preoccupation for Weber. His masterly analyses of the world religions were motivated by the desire to provide a satisfactory answer to that question. His careful, empirical-historical examination of the ancient Israelite beliefs persuaded him that they had formed a new world-view with far-reaching implications. 'Nature' had been divested of all spirits, forces and numina, thus becoming a mere object of rational domination. And an equally fastidious examination of Eastern religion convinced Weber that it had produced quite opposite effects.

Religion, for Weber was neither an epiphenomenon nor a prime mover of history. It was rather a significant element in a complex constellation of factors. Moreover, Weber nowhere proposed a general theory of the relation of religion to other conditions. All of Weber's theories, whether concerned with the Protestant Ethic or with Hinduism and Taoism were historically specific: if Eastern religion had placed obstacles before the development of industrial capitalism, that was true only in a specific historical epoch. Weber observes that when the Western powers began to build railroads and factories in China, the geomancers demanded that in locating 'structures on certain mountains, forests, rivers, and cemetery hills, foresight should be exercised in order not to disturb the peace of the spirits'.[10] Then in a footnote Weber adds this observation:

> as soon as the Mandarins realized the chances for gain open to them, these difficulties suddenly ceased to be insuperable; today [1920] they are the leading stockholders in the railways. In the long run, no religious-ethical conviction is capable of barring the way to the entry of capitalism, when it stands in full armour before the gate; but the fact that it is [now] able to leap over magical barriers does not prove that genuine capitalism could have originated in circumstances where magic played such a role.[11]

Weber's sociology of religion is to be admired for the wealth of substantive knowledge and insights we gain from it. But Weber's sociology is equally and perhaps mainly to be admired for its methodological contribution. For it is in his comparative studies of religion that

[9] Max Weber, *General Economic History*, trs. Frank H. Knight (New York, Collier Books, 1961), p. 265.
[10] Ibid., p. 265.
[11] Ibid., p. 276, n. 4.

he employs an historical-sociological method, the extraordinary fruitful-
ness of which becomes all the more evident when we compare it with
non-sociological modes of inquiry. It is therefore a central aim of the
present study to apply that method towards the resolution of basic
issues. Accordingly we will follow the 'rules' of Weber's *Verstehensozi-
ologie*, striving to grasp the subjective meanings which the actors
themselves have attributed to their conduct. Employing biblical and
extra-biblical evidence, we shall address the question of how the actors
concerned – whether they were patriarchs, prophets, judges, kings, or
the people – understood themselves, their world and their faith.

However, our admiration for Weber must not inhibit us from
subjecting his own work to critical scrutiny. *Ancient Judaism* is a superb
piece of intellectual craftsmanship, rightly regarded as a classic. Never-
theless, over sixty years have elapsed since its publication and in the
interval significant changes have taken place in the field of biblical
scholarship. Biblical and Near Eastern archaeology has become a well-
developed scientific discipline. I have in mind the work of W. F.
Albright, G. E. Wright, K. Kenyon and Father Roland de Vaux, to name
just a few of its outstanding representatives. At the same time new
schools have emerged. The most influential are the so-called German
school of Albrecht Alt and Martin Noth, and in Scandinavia of Pedersen
and his disciples. Finally, there are distinguished Israeli scholars,
notably Y. Kaufmann. In a word, so much has happened in the world of
biblical and Near Eastern studies that it is time to ask whether and in
what respect Weber's work needs to be updated or corrected.

1

The nature of polytheism

Max Weber adopted the concept of 'ideal-type' as a basic element of his sociological method. The so-called 'ideal-type' is an intellectual construct in which one brings together all the characteristic features of a given cultural phenomenon, thereby defining its basic nature.[1] Let us therefore assemble the characteristic features of polytheism so that it can be meaningfully compared with ancient Judaism.

Polytheism[2] entails a good deal more than worshipping many gods instead of only one. The most fundamental characteristic of polytheistic religions is that the gods do not reign supreme. Throughout we find them dominated by a higher order, a supradivine impersonal force to which they always remain subject. The superordinate power assumes diverse forms. However, it is best known to Western readers as 'fate,' the Greek *moira*, which not only predetermines the destiny of men, but of gods as well.[3] The inexorable power of *moira* over men is most clearly expressed in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. Oedipus kills his father in accordance with the oracle, and this despite the father's efforts to foil the prophecy by abandoning Oedipus in his infancy. In the end, it is not known whether the oracle was fulfilled despite the precautions taken or because of them. Fate had its way.

No less inexorable is the power of *moira* over the gods. In Greek mythology Zeus is the supreme ruler. His power is greater than that of all the other deities combined. Yet he is neither omnipotent nor omniscient. Other gods can oppose and deceive him, and fate is so

---

[1] Max Weber, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, trs. and ed. E. A. Shils and H. A. Finch (Glencoe, Illinois, The Free Press, 1949), p. 90ff.

[2] Throughout this study the terms polytheism and paganism are used interchangeably; no value judgement is intended by either of these terms.

[3] See Max Weber, *Economy and Society* (New York, Bedminster Press, 1968), Vol. II, p. 430f.

powerful that Zeus is helpless before it. He laments that he cannot save his own son from the death fate has decreed. It is simply not within his or any other god's power 'to avoid the fate that is ordained'.[4]

In the religions of the Far East, one may also discern a supradivine, impersonal force. In both Confucianism and Taoism it is this force that ensures the regularity and felicitous order of the world. Among the Hindus there is the 'notion of a supradivine and cosmic all-unity, superordinate to the gods and alone independent of the senseless change and transitoriness of the entire phenomenal world'.[5]

Directly related to the supradivine are mythology and magic, two additional characteristic elements of polytheistic religion. The ancient Greeks, not atypical in this regard, 'did not believe that the gods created the universe. It was the other way about: the universe created the gods. Before there were gods heaven and earth had been formed.'[6] From Hesiod's *Theogony* we learn of the origin of the gods and from Homer's epics we learn about their own adventures and their relations with men. In Greek as in other mythologies there are circumstances in which human beings gain the ability, by means of magic, to influence, control and even coerce the gods. What makes this possible is the existence of the supradivine, impersonal force which the magicians have learned to manipulate. Hence, the gods are not only subordinate to a superior force and the creatures rather than the creators of the first forms of being, they may also be coerced and made to do the bidding of human magicians.

That is not all. The deities are literally dependent upon human beings in several fundamental respects; for they derive their nourishment from the offerings of the sacrificial cult. They are also dependent creatures in that they not only lust for one another, but for humans as well. Humans may also achieve divine status (apotheosis), and short of this they may become heroes and demigods. Finally we learn from the mythologies of the world that gods war among themselves and that they ultimately represent two independent domains, such as good and evil, light and darkness.

These, then, appear to be the basic, constituent elements of polytheism which may be inferred from a survey of the world's mythologies. For our purposes the important question is what form these elements had assumed in the ancient Near East.

---

[4] Edith Hamilton, *Mythology* (New York and Toronto, Mentor Books, 1940), p. 27.
[5] Weber, *Economy and Society*, pp. 431 and 448.
[6] Hamilton, *Mythology*, p. 24.

THE RELIGIONS OF MESOPOTAMIA

Sumeria is the most ancient of the known societies and cultures of the Near East. The Sumerians were a non-Semitic people who invented the cuneiform script. Among the tablets unearthed in several excavations, there is a large number dated about 1750 BC, inscribed with epics and myths as well as other literary compositions. Six of the nine epic tales which have been restored recount the feats of three great Sumerian heroes: Enmerkar, Lugalbanda and Gilgamesh, who may have lived in the fourth or third millennium BC. The three remaining tales tell of the destruction of Kur, the primeval monster who has his counterpart in the Babylonian goddess Tiamat, the Hebrew Leviathan and the Greek Typhon.[7]

What these epics, myths and hymns clearly reveal are several basic elements of polytheism besides the existence of a pantheon. The Sumerian cosmogonic and creation myths trace the origin of the universe to the primeval sea. This was the first form of being. The primeval sea begot heaven and earth, gods conceived in human form and united in a cosmic mountain. Heaven (*An*) the male and earth (*Ki*) the female then begot the air god (Enlil) who separated heaven from earth and carried off his mother *Ki*. Following this, man was created and civilization established. We learn from this literature that a human hero, Gilgamesh, could come to the aid of a goddess (Inanna) and that a mortal could cohabit with her.[8] The Sumerian universe included a nether world, an autonomous and dangerous domain inhabited by dead heroes and shades; and the most fundamental of the polytheistic elements, a supradivine force, is also evident in this literature.

In a poem dealing with Enlil's creation of the pickaxe, we read that his decrees are unalterable once they have been issued. The decrees, partaking of the supradivine, can be appropriated and employed by a god, but they remain stronger than he and independent of him.[9] That the decrees of fate are hypostatized forces is clear from the fact that while one god may have them in his charge, another god may steal and lay hold of them. We read, for instance, that the queen of heaven, Inanna, who wishes to increase her city's prosperity, travels to Eridu, the

---

[7] S. N. Kramer, *Sumerian Mythology* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972), p. 13f.

[8] S. N. Kramer, *Mythologies of the Ancient World*, (New York, Doubleday Anchor Books, 1961), p. 117.

[9] Ibid., p. 52 and 59.

ancient seat of Sumerian culture, where Enki, the lord of wisdom, dwells. Enki controls all the decrees that are essential to civilization. Charmed by Inanna, he becomes happy with drink and agrees to present her with more than 100 decrees or *me's*, which she loads onto the boat of heaven making off with her precious cargo. But when the effects of the beer have worn off, Enki, discovering that the *me's* are not in their usual place, calls his servant Isimud who reminds his master that he himself had presented them to his daughter Inanna. Enki at once orders Isimud to overtake her and to restore the precious cargo of *me's*. With the aid of sea monsters Isimud several times attempts to seize the boat of heaven. But Ninshubur, her vizier, rescues her each time until the boat arrives at Erech safe and sound. There she is joyously received by the inhabitants and the decrees are unloaded one by one.[10]

Another myth concerns itself with the flood-story, one of the oldest prototypes of the Genesis legend. Ziusudra, the Sumerian counterpart of the biblican Noah, is a pious king who hears the voice of a deity informing him of the divine assembly's decision to destroy mankind by means of a deluge. The next part of the text, which instructs Ziusudra to build a giant boat with which to save himself and others, is missing. When the text continues, it relates that after the flood of seven days and nights, the sun god Utu arrived to light and warm the earth and that Ziusudra offered him a sacrifice of oxen and sheep. In the final lines we learn of Ziusudra's deification. He receives 'life like a god' and enters the divine paradise.[11]

In the myths of the Akkadians (the Babylonians and Assyrians), which are largely derived from Sumeria, we find the same basic elements of polytheism. In Akkad, too, it is the primordial oceans, Tiamat and Apsu, that exist at the very beginning, long before heaven and earth are created. Then several generations of gods are born, including Ea, the god of wisdom. Apsu and Tiamat are so distressed by the continued clamour of the deities that Apsu decides to destroy them. Ea, however, succeeds in preventing this by killing Apsu with the aid of a magical incantation. Ea's wife then gives birth to Marduk, a great god who soon demonstrates his courage. He kills Tiamat who with the assistance of renegade gods and vicious monsters, had been bent on avenging the death of her husband. Splitting Tiamat in two, Marduk then proceeds to create heaven and earth from her huge corpse. Following this, Marduk with the co-operation of his father Ea creates mankind from the blood of the rebel god Kingu, who had led Tiamat's hostile host.

[10] Kramer, *Mythologies of the Ancient World*, p. 115f.
[11] Ibid., pp. 118–119.

The Akkadian like the Sumerian myths also reveal two autonomous domains, antagonistic to each other. There is a nether world where at first the goddess Ereshkigal reigned supreme and where after her unsuccessful struggle with the god Nergal, she reigns jointly with him as his queen.[12]

Evidence for the belief in a supradivine force, the Akkadian equivalent of the Greek *moira* and the Sumerian *me's*, may also be seen in these myths. One concerns itself with the Zu bird, a monstrous being which in its lust for power had stolen the Tablets of Fate, thus gaining sovereignty over the gods until he was slain by a courageous deity.[13] The existence of this super-ordinate force more powerful than the gods is what makes it possible for mortals to wield great magical powers. Adapa, a man, utters a curse which effectively breaks the wings of the south wind, so that it ceases to blow for seven days. Thus the mythologies of Mesopotamia disclose the basic attributes of polytheism, including the concept of an objective impersonal force which controls the entire universe and which is superior to all other forms of being.

EGYPTIAN RELIGION

In Egyptian mythology there is also clear evidence for the belief in the existence of a supradivine force, principle, 'law,' or essence. The Egyptians referred to this force as *Maat*. The word means 'truth' or 'justice,' but it also points to the cosmic principle responsible for order, stability, harmony and security. It has been present from the very beginning – perhaps eternally – and it is the unchanging essence to which everything else is subordinate.[14]

It is this principle or 'essence' which serves as the foundation of pagan magic. By partaking of it, the human magician acquires power over men *and* gods. One finds that the Egyptian magician not only demands the aid of the gods, he also frequently speaks as though he were a god himself. There are instances in which a god grants his assistance as a gift if the magician addresses him in the correct terms. However, the magician can also compel the deity to do his bidding by means of threats. Here is an example:

[12] Ibid., p. 124.
[13] James B. Pritchard (ed.), *The Ancient Near East* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1975), Vol. II, pp. 17–26.
[14] See *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, trs. and intro. E. A. Wallis Budge (New York, Dover Publications, 1967), p. CXIX.

> Oh, ye gods of the horizon! Verily, if ye desire that Atum (your lord) should live, that ye may anoint yourselves with oil, that ye may put on garments, that ye may receive your food; then take his hand and establish him in the Field of Food. If, however, thou wilt not ferry the boat to him ... then will he tear the hair off thy head.[15]

The magician also threatens the universe if he remains unsatisfied: 'then Re shall not ascend into heaven, but the Nile shall ascend into heaven, and live upon truth, and Re shall descend into the water and live upon fish.'[16] In other instances the magician announces that he knows the great secret of the gods, their names in which their power resides. The divine names partake of something more powerful than the deities themselves, and therefore can be employed by the magician to coerce them. Even the gods themselves have recourse to magic in order to influence their fate.

The Egyptians gave the name *neter* to a supreme power which they believed created much of the universe. What the word precisely means is not clear to specialists. Alongside the *neter* were a number of entities called *neteru*, universally translated by Egyptologists as 'gods.' Supernatural, yet finite beings, they were endowed by the Egyptians with human passions of every kind. What is more, they were mortal, and could be hunted, snared, killed, roasted and eaten.

Even the great god Ra possessed all the weaknesses and frailties of mortal men. This is what we learn from the myth of Ra and Isis, which opens with these words: 'Now Isis was a woman who possessed words of power.'[17] Isis, originally a mortal, aspires to become a goddess by laying hold of the sacred name of the great god, Ra. He is described as old, dribbling at the mouth and with his spittle falling upon the ground. Seizing the opportunity, Isis kneads the spittle with the earth, and forms a sacred serpent in the shape of a spear, which she then lays on the ground where the great god was wont to take his daily walk. He is bitten by the serpent and cries out, the flame of life departing from him. Delirious with pain he recounts the details of his biography saying, among other things, 'my father and my mother uttered my name; but it hath been hidden within me by him that begot me, who would not that the words of power of any seer should have dominion over me.'[18] He

---

[15] Adolph Erman, *A Handbook of Egyptian Religion* (London, Archibald Constable, 1907), p. 150.
[16] Ibid., p. 154.
[17] *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, ed. Wallis Budge, p. XXXIX.
[18] Ibid., p. XC.

then concludes by proclaiming that he has been stung, he knows not by what, whether by fire or by water, and he calls for the children of the gods with their healing words. But while the gods come to him only in tears, Isis comes with her 'healing words and with her mouth full of the breath of life, with her enchantments which destroy sickness, and with her words of power which make the dead to live'.[19] She then informs him that he has been bitten by a serpent and that she shall heal him.

But first she requests that he tell her his name. Instead of doing so, he relates in detail the objects of his creation: the heavens, the earth, the mountains, the water, the sea, etc. and concludes by saying that though he has done all this, the gods do not know his name. Meanwhile the poison penetrates deeper and the great god can no longer walk. Isis again asks him for his name and he, in great pain, the poison burning like fire, finally yields. He consents that she should search him and that his name pass unto her. Isis, the lady of enchantments, now commands the poison to go forth from Ra, and proclaims that though Ra will live, his name has been taken away from him and that she is now the 'great goddess, the queen of gods, who knew Ra by his own name'.[20]

Thus the greatest of gods is less powerful than his name, which is jealously guarded lest it fall into the wrong hands. Not only does the great god suffer terrible pain, but the lesser deities are powerless to aid him in his distress. It is rather a mortal, a seer and an enchantress who possesses 'words of power' and who can therefore drive the poison from his body. But he must pay the price by revealing his name, thereby facilitating her apotheosis.

The fact that the name is stronger than the god and that it makes possible the deification of humans, suggests that it consists or partakes of the supradivine principle. Some early Egyptologists viewed this principle as the one great god. But there are no good grounds for the once fashionable view that Egyptian religion was a pure monotheism which merely manifested itself externally in an apparent polytheism. It is true that some texts speak of a being or essence (*nutar*) which is eternal and alone. But it must be seriously questioned whether *nutar* may be translated as 'one God' in our sense, since it is doubtful that it ever became a proper name signifying a personal god rather than an impersonal force.[21] Moreover, even if one accepts the view that there is evidence in the pyramid texts for a form of monotheism as early as the

---

[19] Ibid., p. XC.
[20] Ibid., p. XCI.
[21] Ibid., p. XCIII.

Old Kingdom (2800–2250 BC), it is certain that it never displaced polytheism or even rendered it a secondary, declining tendency.

The same is true of the now famous 'monotheism' of Amenhotep IV (1387–1366 BC) or Akhnaton (Ikhnaton). This Pharaoh, as is well known, came under the influence of the Heliopolis priesthood and put forward their doctrine that the sun god, Re-Harakhti, was the greatest of all the gods, the creator of the world. He was without equal 'and entitled not only to the universal but even to the sole worship of his adherents. The other gods were nothing but different forms or manifestations of the sun-god himself.'[22] Ultimately Re-Harakhti, Aton (an old name designating the orb of the sun itself) and Shu (another sun god worshipped at Heliopolis) came to be regarded as the same deified form of the sun. So devoted was Amenhotep IV to this new creed that he created a special place for the worship of Aton. This was the great plain called Amarna, midway between Thebes and Memphis. The new site was given the name Akhetaton ('horizon of Aton') and became the personal property of the new god.

However, notwithstanding the Pharaoh's devotion to the sun god, he at first refrained from attacking the cults of the other gods and allowed himself to be portrayed in inscriptions and reliefs as a worshipper of Amun, Thoth, Seth and other divinities. In the sixth year of his reign he established the worship of Aton as the state religion. Thereafter 'not only the Egyptians but the subject Nubians and Asiatics as well were to serve this god alone. The temples of the other divinities were everywhere closed and their property seized.'[23] Akhnaton then had himself raised to the status of a divinity and promulgated a doctrine of his actual identity with the sun god. And while the new state religion prohibited the earlier representations of the divinity in a human form with the head of a falcon, and permitted no images of Aton, worship was directed towards the visible radiant sun.[24] Most of the high officials appear to have complied with the Pharaoh's religious edicts, but the masses continued in the old ways.

In this light it is clear that Akhnaton's so-called 'monotheism' was never actually divested of the polytheistic-mythological elements of the age-old, dominant religion. The new cult never struck roots among the people and was confined to the ranks of the ruling elite. Nor did the new doctrine have any ethical emphasis whatsoever. So if it was 'mono-

[22] George Steindorff and Keith C. Seele, *When Egypt Ruled the East* (Chicago and London. University of Chicago Press, 1971), p. 204.
[23] Ibid., p. 206.
[24] Ibid., p. 216.

theism', it was ephemeral, partial and ineffectual since polytheism continued to flourish after Akhnaton's reign.[25]

Accordingly, the prevalent myths taught that originally there existed only primeval water, *Nu*, and everything that arose from it was a deity. The god, Tmu, for example, had resided in the primeval water, and when he first emerged in the form of the sun, he proceeded to create the world.[26] There are several other versions of creation, but in all of them the primeval matter is primary and the gods secondary.

Some of the gods personified natural forces, the guardians and givers of life and happiness to mankind. These gods had enemies, however, that were opposed to the beneficent forces as darkness is to light and night to day. When the Egyptians personified the forces of good they portrayed them in human form; but to the forces of evil they gave the shapes of noxious beasts such as snakes and scorpions.

It is evident that in the Egyptian religious culture as in the Mesopotamian, the basic characteristics of polytheism may be discerned. The supradivine principle, the coercion of gods and the forcing of their secrets by human magicians, the finite and dependent character of the gods, the deification of both human beings and natural forces and, finally, two autonomous domains of good and evil, are all to be found in Egyptian mythology.

It remains for us to consider one more religious culture, that of the Canaanites, which many scholars believe had the most profound impact on the religious beliefs and practices of the Israelites.

CANAANITE RELIGION

Our knowledge of Canaanite mythology has been greatly enriched by the important discovery in 1929 of what has come to be called the Ras Shamra tablets. Ras Shamra means 'fennel mound,' a name Syrian peasants gave the site because of the flowers which grew there.[27] The

---

[25] W. F. Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity*, 2nd ed. (New York, Doubleday Anchor Books, 1957), pp. 213–219.

[26] *The Egyptian Book of the Dead*, ed. Wallis Budge, p. XCVIII.

[27] Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity*, p. 39f. and 230f. The present discussion is based on the following works: G. R. Driver, *Canaanite Myths and Legends*, (Edinburgh, T. & T. Clark, 1956); John Gray, *The Legacy of Canaan: The Ras Shamra Texts and Their Relevance to the Old Testament*, 2nd rev. ed. (Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1965); Arvid S. Kapelrud, *The Ras Shamra Discoveries and the Old Testament*, trs. G. W. Anderson, (Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1963); Umberto Cassuto, *The Goddess Anath: Canaanite Epics of the Patriarchal Age*, trs. Israel Abrahams

now famous mound concealed the ancient city of Ugarit, known to us from Babylonian, Hittite and Egyptian records. Unearthed on the mound was a Baal temple, and connected to it was a building which may have been a library. There the texts were discovered, an assortment of documents written on tablets in Accadian, Hurrian and Sumerian, as well as Ugaritic. The last of these was, at the time of the find, an unknown language to scholars, but was speedily deciphered. Recorded on several of the tablets was a variety of Canaanite myths attesting to the nature of Canaanite religion.

The Canaanite gods were not first causes. This is implicit in the myths found at Ras Shamra and expressly stated in later formulations of the Canaanite theogony. In the beginning there existed only Spirit (Wind) and chaos, its source. Then Desire appeared and moved Spirit to mate with Chaos. Their offspring was Mot, the father of all creatures. In another version, only Time, Desire and Mist existed in the beginning. Desire and Mist mated, engendering Air and Wind who produced the cosmic egg, the source of all creatures. The Canaanite gods thus emerged from previous forms of being as a product of desire and sexual relations. Accordingly we find in the Ras Shamra tablets that the deities continue to be dominated by sexual lust and other natural forces. The Canaanite pantheon was a family of males and females who suckled at the breasts of their mothers, who fought and vanquished one another, who built dwellings, and who made great banquets and relied for their nourishment on sacrificial offerings. Who were the members of the Canaanites' pantheon?

El

The father of the divine family is El, a generic term that subsequently became his proper name. Philo of Biblus identified him with Kronos of the Greeks. El is the father of Baal, Anath (Baal's sister), Mot, and a number of other deities borne to him by his spouse Asherah. The divinities taken as a whole are called 'the sons of El' or the 'sons of Asherah,' of which there are seventy. From one of the epithets ascribed to El in the Ugaritic texts – 'creator of creatures' – it is evident that he

(Jerusalem, Hebrew University, The Magnes Press, 1971); Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1973); Ulf Oldenburg, *The Conflict Between El and Baal in Canaanite Religion* (Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1969); Theodor H. Gaster, *Thespis: Ritual, Myth, and Drama in the Ancient Near East*, new and rev. ed. (New York, Gordian Press, 1975).

eventually came to be regarded as a creator of the world. In another designation he is 'father of mankind'. This conception is in accord with what we find in Genesis 14.18f., where Melchizedek king of Salem (apparently the Canaanite king of Jerusalem) and priest of El Elyon ('God Most High') brings out bread and wine to honour Abram for his victory. The king blesses Abram in the name of *El Elyon Koneh shamayim va-aretz* (God Most High, Maker of heaven and earth). This may refer to El, the father of the divine family.

And from Abram's oath in Genesis 14.22, where he swears to the king of Sodom by the name of *'Yahweh, El Elyon Koneh shamayim va-aretz'*, it appears that the children of Israel may have come to identify 'the most high god' of the Canaanites with their own one god.[28]

In the Ugaritic texts El is called 'king,' although he did not reign but dwelt far from the inhabited world at 'the mouth of the rivers' and 'amidst the channels of the two deeps.' The dominion of the world was divided among his three sons: Baal, ruler of the heavens; Mot, ruler of *Sheol* (the netherworld); and Yam, prince of the sea. Only on matters relating to the government of the world would the gods journey to El's dwelling place to receive his counsel. All this bears a striking similarity to the Greek myths concerning kronos (or Cronus), whose sons deposed him and partitioned the universe, each one ruling a given domain: Zeus the heavens, Hades the netherworld and Poseidon the sea. Hence scholars have surmised that the Canaanites had at one time similarly conceived of El as ruler of the entire world who was later dethroned by his sons. These parallels between the Canaanite and Greek stories suggest that the Greek myths most probably originated in the Near East.

Asherah

In its full form the name of the goddess Asherah is *Atrt Ym*, 'she that marches upon the sea'. She is El's spouse and the mother of all the other deities. As a rule her name is preceded by *rbt*, i.e. 'lady'. In the epic of Keret she is designated as 'Asherah of the Tyrians' and the 'goddess of the Sidonians' – an indication that she was particularly worshipped in Tyre and Sidon (Phoenicia). Like Ashtoreth and Anath she was regarded as the goddess of fertility, and at times the distinction among the three deities is blurred. In the tablets dealing with the cult, reference is made to sacrifices of large and small cattle in honour of Asherah.

[28] Cassuto, *The Goddess Anath*, p. 54f.

Baal

This name is essentially an appellative meaning 'lord.' In the Ugaritic poems it designates Hadad or Had, the storm god. Baal or Had, it was believed, caused the wind to blow and the rain to fall; he was the source of the earth's fertility. Since the earth was in this way beholden to him, he was also 'Prince, lord of the earth' as well as 'rider of the clouds' and 'the mightiest warrior.' Everyone and everything alive in the world – vegetation, animals, humans and gods – owed their life, sustenance and fertility to Baal.

When Baal was 'slain' by Mot and descended to the netherworld, the earth ceased to give forth its produce. Only when he was resuscitated did abundance again appear. Against Mot, Baal proudly proclaims, 'it is I who feed gods and men.' In a relief found at Ugarit, Baal is portrayed as a warrior with a club in one hand and lightning in the other. Beneath him is the sign for water, signifying that he treads upon the high places of the sea; and on his head are horns, a symbol of fertility.[29]

Mot

This means 'death' in the Canaanite language and in Hebrew as well. In the poems Mot is found cutting off life and bringing death. He represents the anti-life forces in nature and has only the negative role of opposing fertility. He boasts that his destiny is to slay Baal and to drag him down to the netherworld. He has a constant urge to kill, and to gather corpses in great number. As king of the netherworld he 'eats' the living, that is, he causes them to die and to descend into his realm. In the Ugaritic poems, Mot is not infrequently referred to as *ydd* and *mdd*, both being terms of love and affection. Doubtless these euphemisms were employed in the hope of turning the 'bane into a blessing'.[30]

Anath

Distinguished for her heroism and courage, Anath is a mighty fighter who devastates her foes and bathes her feet in the blood of those she has slain. She is fiercely loyal to Baal and sides with him against Mot. In support of Baal she behaves insolently even towards her aged father El, whom all the other gods treat with respect. Like the other female deities,

[29] Cassuto, *The Goddess Anath*, p. 60.
[30] Ibid., p. 64.

Anath was associated with fertility. From Canaan the cult of Anath passed over to Egypt where during the eighteenth and nineteenth dynasties she was regarded as a puissant goddess and goddess of war. In the Hellenistic period Anath was identified with Athena, the virgin warrior deity.

The Baal Poem

That the members of the Canaanite pantheon are personified natural forces, subject to the higher laws of nature and necessity, becomes altogether clear in the Baal Epic.[31]

Yam (god of sea and sea stream), who was originally granted dominion over the earth, is challenged by Baal, and the two indulge in mutual threats. Yam dispatches messengers to the divine assembly demanding that Baal and his supporters be handed over. With the approach of the messengers, the other gods grow frightened but Baal boastfully reassures them. El replies complacently to the demand, saying that Baal intends Yam no harm and that he need not fear him. Still, the messengers rebuke Baal for the insults hurled at Yam but Baal, in no mood to yield, decides to offer combat. He bids Anath to help him by engaging Yam, who is portrayed as a sea monster. Baal prepares for combat by enlisting the assistance of the divine smith, Sir Adroit-and-Cunning (Koshar-wa-Khasis). He provides Baal with two magic bludgeons which can dart from his hand of themselves and fell the monster without endangering him in a hand-to-hand encounter. Although the first bludgeon proves ineffectual, the second subdues Yam. Baal, about to deliver the *coup de grâce*, is stopped by Asherah (or Ashtoreth) who objects that since Yam has been the common enemy of all gods, Baal ought not claim this triumph for himself. Yam then acknowledges the sovereignty of Baal.

Baal now complains that though he has achieved sovereignty, he has no place of his own on earth and is therefore exposed to the ridicule and contempt of the other deities. He begs Anath to present his case to El with Asherah as intermediary. Anath first chases the monster Yam into the sea and then, after preparing gifts for El, flies to him (evidently together with Baal).

At the approach of Baal and Anath, Asherah is at first alarmed,

---

[31] The present summary of the poem is based on H. L. Ginsberg, 'Ugaritic Myths and Epics,' ed. James B. Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East*, p. 92f. See also Cyrus H. Gordon, 'Canaanite Mythology', in S. N. Kramer, *Mythologies of the Ancient World*, pp. 181–215; and T. H. Gaster, *Thespis*, p. 153f.

fearing hostile intentions on their part. However, upon seeing the gifts they have brought, she is mollified. She assures Baal that the sea monster will give him no more trouble and that Baal's sovereignty is secure. But Baal replies that being without a palace he is subject to incessant insults. Asherah asks why he and Anath have not gone directly to El and they explain that they desire her intercession. Upon hearing this, the mother-goddess warmly invites them to regale themselves with food and drink. The meal over, Asherah presents Baal's case to El who raises no objection. Thanking him, she proceeds to convey the good news to Anath and Baal who have been waiting at a distance.

Exultantly, Baal now prepares to build his palace, and invites the divine architect and smith to a banquet where the building plans are discussed. A question arises concerning the advisability of installing windows in the palace. The architect favours them but Baal objects that his maiden daughters are liable to be abducted through them, thus providing Yam with an occasion for holding him up to ridicule. Construction commences while Baal regales the gods at a banquet. Now he administers the finishing blow to the vanquished Yam and embarks on a one-man expedition to build an empire and to consolidate his kingdom. Successfully accomplishing his mission, he returns to the palace and announces that he will now allow the windows to be installed. The opening of these windows will open the 'windows of heaven' and thus assure the earth of rainfall in due season.

Baal now declares that he will tolerate no opposition to his reign and most certainly not from Mot. Two couriers are sent by Baal to Mot to inform him that hereafter his permanent abode will be the netherworld and that when he visits the earth he is to restrict himself to deserts and other barren places. Baal is bent on additional conquests; but Mot, trying to deter him and eager to lure him down into the netherworld, warns Baal that such adventures might spell his doom. Returning to Baal with Mot's words, the couriers also inform him that Mot has invited him to a banquet in his dark realm. The text now breaks off for some 50 lines. When it resumes we find Baal in a state of terror at the prospect of having to accept Mot's invitation, which is actually a challenge. He sends Mot a message of conciliation, but Mot responds by taunting him for his lack of bravery, making it clear that he will not be appeased.

Thus compelled to descend into Mot's realm, Baal is advised to take along his staff, his brides and his weapons; he is also advised to copulate with a calf in order to acquire the strength of a bull and in order to leave offspring on earth should he fail to return. Baal follows the advice and

then leaves for the netherworld. His disappearance is reported to El, who mourns for Baal. He is interred.

Anath, also in mourning, and accompanied by the sun goddess, descends to the lower domain, retrieves Baal's body and ascends to the North. The ceremonial burial then takes place and a hecatomb is offered in his honour. Anath then proceeds to El and remorsefully announces that Baal is dead, remarking that this news will no doubt be received gleefully by all the gods who have opposed his sovereignty. El proposes that a successor to Baal be named and Asherah nominates Ashtar (*Athtar*), who ascends the mountain of the North to occupy Baal's vacant throne. Ashtar, however, proves too small and returns to earth to exercise a more limited sovereignty.

Anath begins to roam the earth in search for Baal and encountering Mot, she demands Baal's restoration. Mot rejects her demand. Later, in a second encounter with Mot, she savagely falls upon him and slays him. She then relates to El a dream portending Baal's return to life and earth. El, jubilant upon hearing this, sends Anath to inquire of the sun goddess where Baal is exactly, for the earth stands in urgent need of his ministrations. Anath does as she is bid and the sun goddess promises to search for him.

Baal, now having returned to life, engages in battle all those of his brother-gods who countenanced the usurpation of his throne. Soon afterwards, Mot also appears and once again challenges Baal's sovereignty. A furious battle ensues while the sun goddess, witnessing the struggle from on high, presses Mot to yield. Frightened by the warning, he surrenders. Baal is now restored and celebrated while Anath embarks on a vengeful rampage against Mot's henchmen. They are found wherever they are hiding and massacred. After cleansing herself, Anath receives Baal's messengers who convey his desire to usher in an era of peace. She indicates compliance with his wishes. This is where the text breaks off, the rest of the tablet being lost.

How does one interpret this epic? What might it have meant to the people of Ugarit? One of the best-known interpretations is the 'seasonal hypothesis' of T. H. Gaster. In his view the epic is not merely a story of the quarrels and contentions of various gods and goddesses. Rather, 'it is a nature myth and its theme is the alternation of the seasons.'[32] Baal, as the genius of rainfall, holds sway during the wet season, from late September to May. But first he must subdue Yam, 'the rival power of

[32] Gaster, *Thespis*, p. 124.

the waters which, at the beginning of that season, threaten to overwhelm the earth with floods and equinoctial gales and thereby to "possess" it. And he is in turn succeeded by Mot, genius of drought and aridity, who enjoys a free hand . . . during the dry season from early May until late September.'[33]

Hence, for Gaster, these mythological texts, like others of the ancient world, reflect a patterned sequence of ritual acts which accompanied the change of seasons. The texts may not actually have been the scripts for liturgical dramas but they were 'mythic and literary articulations of the same basic Seasonal Pattern'.[34] Myth, it must be emphasized, contains the element of mimesis, turning the participants into actors so that they become 'both protagonists of a direct experience and impersonators of characters other than their own'.[35] As the studies of Gilbert Murray, Jane Harrison and Francis Cornford have suggested, it is from a ritual and cultic context such as this, that the ancient Greek drama may have developed.

Yet this 'seasonal' hypothesis has not gone unchallenged. G. R. Driver, following Cyrus Gordon, has questioned the view that the Baal poem is a seasonal myth telling of the annual death and revival of the god as the cause of the natural vegetation cycle. Nowhere in the texts are his death and revival described as either annual or seasonal, though his dying does appear on occasion to be viewed as the reason for the hot and dry summer. Droughts accompany or follow a variety of events and are of varying durations. Seven-year droughts, for example, follow not only the 'slaying' of Baal, but also the death of Athtar. Most probably, therefore, it was not the natural cycle of seasons that caused the people's anxiety, but rather the very bad years or a series of such years.

For Driver, the meaning of the poem may be found in the struggles of three gods: Baal (god of thunder and rain), Yam-Nahar (god of seas and rivers) and Athtar (god of artificial irrigation). They are the representatives of three types of irrigation, struggling as it were for the vacant throne of the old God El. Yam is the turbulent and unpredictable source of water because the sea may flood and spoil the land while the rivers may run dry. Nevertheless he receives El's permission to build a palace and rule. Yam is challenged and defeated by Baal who then obtains the right to build a palace of his own; after some hesitation he is persuaded to furnish it with windows. However, there is still the problem of dealing with Mot, for he brings drought and death when Baal cannot or will not

[33] Gaster, *Thespis*, p. 126.
[34] Ibid., p. 12.
[35] Ibid., p. 77.

provide rain. He descends to contend with Mot and in his absence life on earth languishes – so much so that he is said to be dead. It is at this moment that El appoints Athtar to the throne, in the hope that artificial methods of irrigation will suffice. But he proves 'too small' for the throne, meaning that those methods are in fact insufficient. Baal, now revived, destroys first Athtar and then Mot and proceeds to validate his claim to the throne by taking his sister Anath as wife and by begetting offspring with her so that his name will live forever.

Interpreted in this way, Driver convincingly argues, the epic explains how and why Baal came to occupy his position of supremacy second only to his suzerain, El. Rain, the epic is saying, 'is the ultimate source of the life-giving water which is essential to the whole of nature, however it [the water] may be distributed'.[36]

There are, of course, still other ways of interpreting the epic. The conflict between Baal and Mot expresses the unceasing tension in nature between the forces of life and death. Throughout human existence a fearful struggle is waged against all those powers that strive to overwhelm life; and although life suffers temporary setbacks, it is triumphant in the end. In these terms the epic expresses the hopeful world-outlook of the inhabitants· of ancient Ugarit.

'The gods gracious'

There is still another Canaanite myth which appears to be a mytho-logical-ritual drama, but of a burlesque type (which supports the view that not only ancient Greek tragedy but comedy as well may have had its roots in dramatic cultic ceremonies of an earlier era).

The 'gods gracious' concerns itself with the aged god El and with the question of whether he is virile or impotent. The myth is suspenseful since his impotence would mean that lean years lie ahead. The scene opens with El arriving at the seashore where he intends to create two women over the fire and to fetch water for his household needs. The women are fashioned and placed in his house. He then lowers his staff (symbolizing his penis), and shoots a bird which he then cleans and roasts over the fire. This excites the passions of the two women who in turn try to arouse him with erotic remarks about his actions. What is at stake here, is whether he will rise to virility so that the women may serve as wives and bear offspring.[37]

---

[36] Driver, *Canaanite Myths and Legends*, p. 21.
[37] Gordon, 'Canaanite Mythology', p. 187f.

El copulates with them and they bear him two children: Dawn and Dusk (or Sunset). The birth is reported to El who upon hearing the children described as Dawn and Dusk, orders them transposed to heaven. The suspense remains. For while Dawn and Dusk are impor- tant, they do not fulfil the primary fertility aims of the ritual. Hence, El again embraces the women who this time conceive and bear children named 'the gods gracious'. They are fertility gods who are recognized as such by the fact that they suckle at Asherah's breasts from the moment of their birth and especially by their superhuman appetites. The births are again reported to El. When he learns that the children's appetites cannot be sated with birds and fish, he orders them sent to the desert where they are to fend for themselves. Wandering in the desert for several years (a cycle of lean years) they come upon the guardian of the sown. 'O Guardian, Guardian open!' they shout, and he provides them with grain. No sooner has he done so, however, than they ask for the hospitality due to guests and demand bread and wine. The guardian responds with food and drink, thus affirming that the cycle of lean years is at an end and that a period of plenty is about to begin. The text therefore appears to be a ritual for ushering in the fat years.

Cyrus Gordon, a leading authority on the Ugaritic texts, describes the form of the ritual as a dramatic one which 'was doubtless acted out. Our text is the libretto with stage directions. The authority that is invoked to produce the results is a myth.'[38] The myth explains to the participants in the ceremony why it is addressed to the celestial deities Dawn and Dusk and to the terrestrial 'gods gracious' and why bread and wine are offered to them on that occasion. Myth is therefore a 'creative word' intended to enhance the efficacy of the ritual act.[39] As instruments of imitative magic, myths were designed to influence the divine forces. In these terms myth and ritual expressed the aspirations of the Canaanite peasant and as such were a vital element of his labour on the land. Where were these rituals acted out? The 'house of El' and the 'house of Baal' suggests either that structures were erected for the occasion, as for the *hieros gamos*, or that the temple was the site employed for that purpose.[40]

From this survey of Canaanite myths it is clear that they do in fact exhibit what we have called the basic elements of polytheism. Preceding the Canaanite deities there existed a primordial form of being from

[38] Gordon, 'Canaanite Mythology', p. 190.
[39] Gray, *The Legacy of Canaan*, p. 13.
[40] Ibid., p. 53.