

Examining Christian Doctrine

Lesson 3: The Doctrine of God – Early Beliefs about God

In this session we will look at some of the early beliefs of God that nations in the Ancient Near East held, including ancient Israel. The religious landscape surrounding ancient Israel was very complex and diverse where multiple gods were worshipped.

We find evidence of this throughout the Old Testament, which gives us a glimpse into the fuller development of the Doctrine of God that eventually evolved into a pure monotheistic faith.

The early Old Testament reflects the belief of the existence of these other gods. The interesting thing is that many passages in the Old Testament do not specifically deny the existence of other gods, which is a surprise to many Christians, but it does always show Yahweh's supremacy over these gods.

As we move through the time of the monarchy, exile, and post exile we see a gradual moving away from this polytheistic belief into the belief of one God, Yahweh.

Important Terms

'The gods': Were thought to be divine beings or entities worshipped and revered in ancient Near Eastern cultures. These gods were believed to possess supernatural powers and attributes, governing various aspects of the natural world (Sun, water, seas, storms etc.), human affairs, and the universe.

Polytheism: a religious belief system that involves the worship of multiple gods or deities. In polytheistic religions, gods are often associated with specific aspects of nature, human affairs, or cosmic forces, and worshippers may engage in rituals and ceremonies to honor and appease these divine beings.

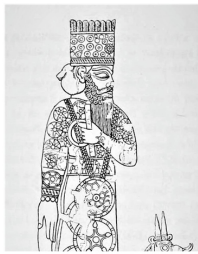
Monotheism: a religious belief system that involves the belief and acknowledgement of a single supreme deity or god. In monotheistic religions, there is typically a belief in one all-powerful, all-knowing, and omnipresent God who is the creator and sustainer of the universe. Monotheistic religions often emphasize the uniqueness, transcendence, and moral attributes of their deity.

Monolatry: a religious belief or practice in which worship is directed towards a single deity while acknowledging the existence of other gods. Unlike strict monotheism, which asserts the exclusive worship of only one god and denies the existence of other divine beings, monolatry acknowledges the existence of multiple gods but focuses worship on one particular deity as the supreme or primary object of devotion.

Pantheon: the collective group of gods or deities worshipped in a particular religion or mythology. In ancient polytheistic religions each pantheon consisted of a diverse array of gods and goddesses, each with their own attributes, domains of influence, and practices of worship.

Divine Council: a concept found in ancient Near Eastern religions where the gods are depicted as forming a council or assembly presided over by a chief deity. In the Old Testament, there are several passages that allude to the existence of such a divine council, where God is portrayed as presiding over a group of divine beings or heavenly court. The divine council is often depicted as deliberating on matters of cosmic importance and participating in the governance of the world.

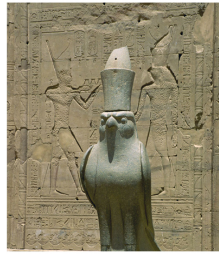
Ancient Near East Land and 'gods'



Marduk
Mesopotamia



El
Canaanite



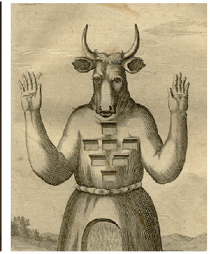
Horus
Egyptian



Baal
Canaanite



Asherah
Canaanite



Moloch
Canaanite

El: was the supreme deity in the Canaanite pantheon and often referred to as the "father of the gods." He was associated with creation, fertility, and kingship, and was depicted as a wise and benevolent figure.

Asherah: was the consort of El and a prominent goddess in the Canaanite religion. She was worshipped as a goddess of fertility, motherhood, and the natural world, often depicted as a tree or pole symbolizing her presence.

Baal: was a major deity in the Canaanite pantheon, associated with storms, rain, and fertility. He was often depicted wielding a thunderbolt or riding a chariot through the clouds. Worship of Baal involved rituals aimed at ensuring agricultural prosperity and fertility for the land.

Anat: was a goddess of war, violence, and fertility, often depicted as a fierce warrior wielding weapons such as a sword or spear. She was associated with victory in battle and the protection of her worshippers.

Dagon: was a god of agriculture, grain, and fertility, depicted as a bearded deity with the lower body of a fish. He was worshipped through rituals aimed at ensuring bountiful harvests and agricultural prosperity.

Yam: was the god of the sea and chaos, often portrayed as a monstrous sea creature. He was associated with storms, floods, and the destructive forces of nature.

Biblical Mentions of Other Deities

Exodus 20:3 (NIV) "You shall have no other gods before me."

Deuteronomy 6:14 (NIV) "Do not follow other gods, the gods of the peoples around you."

1 Kings 11:4-6 (NIV) "As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the Lord his God, as the heart of David his father had been. He followed Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and Molek the detestable god of the Ammonites. So Solomon did evil in the eyes of the Lord; he did not follow the Lord completely, as David his father had done."

Exodus 12:12 (NIV) "On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn of both people and animals, and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the Lord."

Exodus 15:11 (NIV): "Who among the gods is like you, Lord? Who is like you—majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders?"

Exodus 18:11 (NIV) "Now I know that the Lord is greater than all other gods, for he did this to those who had treated Israel arrogantly."

Deuteronomy 7:5 (NIV) "This is what you are to do to them: Break down their altars, smash their sacred stones, cut down their Asherah poles and burn their idols in the fire."

2 Kings 17:30 (NIV) "The people from Babylon made Sukkoth Benoth, those from Kuthah made Nergal, and those from Hamath made Ashima."

Judges 2:11-13 (NIV) "Then the Israelites did evil in the eyes of the Lord and served the Baals. They forsook the Lord, the God of their ancestors, who had brought them out of Egypt. They followed and worshiped various gods of the peoples around them. They aroused the Lord's anger because they forsook him and served Baal and the Ashtoreths."

Judges 11:23-24 "Now since the LORD, the God of Israel, has driven the Amorites out before his people Israel, what right have you to take it over? Will you not take what your god Chemosh gives you? Likewise, whatever the LORD our God has given us, we will possess."

Jeremiah 46:25 (NIV) "The Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: 'I am about to bring punishment on Amon god of Thebes, on Pharaoh, on Egypt and her gods and her kings, and on those who rely on Pharaoh.'"

Psalms 95:1-3 Come, let us sing for joy to the Lord; let us shout aloud to the Rock of our salvation. Let us come before him with thanksgiving and extol him with music and song. For the Lord is the great God, the great King above all gods.

Early Israelites were 'monolatrists' – they acknowledged the existence of other gods but believed worship and devotion should only be given to one God, Yahweh. To them God was not a theological debate on existence, but the emphasis was one of the heart, who would you be devoted and loyal to. For Israel, it was Yahweh alone.

Characteristics of 'the gods'

When you look at the characteristics of the gods of the ancient Near East, you find a much different picture from the God that the Israelites believed in. In Ancient Near Eastern literature the gods were:

- **Fallible** (they make mistakes and misjudgments)
- **Emotional** (negative emotions such as shame and fear)
- **Involved in daily activities** (sleeping, eating, occupations)
- **Have limited power** (not omnipotent and all powerful, were subject to the fate of higher deities)
- **Morally questionable** (capable of doing bad things based on their mood),
- **Competitive and jealous** (engage in rivalry, conflict and jealousy while vying for supremacy)
- **Dependent on human intervention** (they needed human assistance or offering as opposed to the self-sufficiency of Yahweh)

The Divine Council

Within this belief of multiple gods in the Ancient Near East, we find within the Old Testament allusions to an assembly of heavenly beings or gods called the “Divine Council”. In the Divine Council we have an assembly of lesser divine figures, presided over by a higher, supreme being who are engaged with the affairs of people and nations. The divine council was believed to basically act as ‘cosmic overseers’.

The discovery of this belief began when archaeologists began working on a collection of Ugaritic texts from around the time of the biblical judges. One series of large tablets was called the “Baal Cycle” which contains epic texts and stories of a divine council of deities headed by the chief god ‘El’. These stories help explain the Mediterranean cycle of rains and drought and was seen as a struggle between rival deities for supremacy. Featured prominently in this story is the deity Ba’al. Baal was a storm deity who fought with another god Motu to bring about life-giving rains after the dry season.

Other deities were named as part of this divine council of gods, one of these was Asherah who was seen as the wife and consort of El, the chief God. Another god was Yam the god of the seas. Together, they paint a portrait of an Ugaritic worldview in which the various deities are active in their respective domains, forming alliances and also vying for power.

But is there any Biblical evidence of this Divine Council? Scholars have pointed out several scriptures and phrasing that could allude to or be remnants of the early belief in a divine council.

Psalm 82:1 (ESV): God has taken his place in the divine council; in the midst of the gods he holds judgment:

- *Psalm 82:1 (KJV): God standeth in the congregation of the mighty; he judgeth among the gods.*
- *Psalm 82:1 (NASB): God takes His position in His assembly; He judges in the midst of the gods.*
- *Psalm 82:1 (NIV): God presides in the great assembly; he renders judgment among the “gods”*

Psalm 89:5-7 (ESV): Let the heavens praise your wonders, O Lord, your faithfulness in the assembly of the holy ones! For who in the skies can be compared to the Lord? Who among the heavenly beings is like the Lord, a God greatly to be feared in the council of the holy ones, and awesome above all who are around him?

Deuteronomy 32:8-9 (ESV): When the Most High (El-yon) gave to the nations their inheritance, when he divided mankind, he fixed the borders of the peoples according to the number of the sons of God. But the Lord's (Yahweh's) portion is his people, Jacob his allotted heritage.

Neither Jews or Christians today believe in a literal pantheon of gods, and neither did Israel post-exile. So how did these ancient beliefs evolve?

1. Over time the ruling authority of El (the chief God) and Yahweh seem to merge where they became synonymous with each other.
2. Yahweh also assumed the attributes of the other gods, as their attributes were attributed to him.
3. Then, during and after the exile, the gods of the divine council became interpreted and seen as angels, created messengers of Yahweh, instead of separate gods.
4. Finally, Yahweh was then viewed as the one lone ‘council head’ and God over all creation, beings, peoples, and nations with all power and authority.

This was the birth of true monotheism in Israel.

Monotheism in Christianity

Monotheism is the foundation of the Christian faith. Even though, as we have shown, the Israelites lived in a polytheistic world, their devotion was to one God, Yahweh. This devotion to Yahweh led to Israel eventually becoming a solely monotheistic nation, seeing Yahweh as the only God.

This idea is expressed specifically by the prophet Isaiah:

Isaiah 44:6: "This is what the Lord says—Israel's King and Redeemer, the Lord Almighty: I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God."

Isaiah 45:5-6: "I am the Lord, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God. I will strengthen you, though you have not acknowledged me, so that from the rising of the sun to the place of its setting people may know there is none besides me. I am the Lord, and there is no other."

Isaiah 46:9: "Remember the former things, those of long ago; I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me."

It was around the Second Temple Period that we see a full development of monotheism in Judaism. Several factors contributed to this which we will list below. Also, for the church, both Jesus, the writings of the New Testament, and the Early Church Fathers all affirm the belief in one God.

1. **Exilic Experience:** The Babylonian Exile (586-538 BCE) experience of exile led to a renewed emphasis on monotheism as a distinctive aspect of Jewish identity.
2. **Prophetic Tradition:** The prophets of ancient Israel, such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, played a crucial role in advocating for monotheism and condemning the worship of idols and foreign gods. Their teachings and writings emphasized the exclusive worship of Yahweh as the one true God.
3. **Scriptural Development:** The composition and editing of sacred texts, including the Hebrew Bible, during the Second Temple period contributed to the articulation of monotheistic theology.
4. **Reinterpretation of Texts:** One notable reinterpretation involved the understanding of divine beings mentioned in the Hebrew Bible as angels rather than members of a divine council.
5. **Cultural and Religious Reforms:** The reforms instituted by leaders such as Ezra and Nehemiah following the return from exile focused on restoring the centrality of Yahweh and purifying Jewish worship from foreign influences. These reforms emphasized monotheism as the cornerstone of Jewish faith and practice.
6. **Encounters with Hellenistic Culture:** During the Hellenistic period, which began with the conquests of Alexander the Great in the late 4th century BCE, Jewish communities came into contact with Greek culture and philosophy. This encounter prompted intellectual engagement with philosophical questions about the nature of God, leading to theological reflection and the reaffirmation of monotheistic beliefs.
7. **Teachings of Jesus:** Jesus authoritatively affirms the fact that God is the sole creator, sustainer, and God of all. Jesus reveals the true nature of God.
8. **Writings of the New Testament:** Nowhere does the NT indicate any other possibility than monotheism. For example in Paul's argument in *1 Corinthians 8:4-6* *So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that "An idol is nothing at all in the world" and that "There is no God but one." 5 For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"), 6 yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.*
9. **Early Church Fathers:** The Nicene Creed affirms belief in "one God, the Father Almighty."
10. **Trinitarian Theology:** Belief in the Trinity affirmed the existence of one God while also acknowledging the distinctions within the Godhead.