

# Ancient Mediterranean Religions



# Ancient Mediterranean Religions:

*Myth, Ritual and Religious  
Experience*

By

John Stephens

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Ancient Mediterranean Religions: Myth, Ritual and Religious Experience

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This book is dedicated to my three children  
Danica, Elizabeth and Christopher.

Religion is the sphere in which a nation gives itself the definition of that  
which it regards as true.

—Georg W. F. Hegel,  
*The Philosophy of History, 1822.*

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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### **Preliminary Remarks and a Review of Prior Research**

This book provides an introduction to the religious traditions of the ancient Mediterranean world. For the purposes of this study, the term “ancient Mediterranean religious traditions” refers to those religious faiths of the eastern and western Mediterranean world that thrived from the time of the second millennium BCE up until the fourth century CE. The primary objective of this book is to describe the fundamental religious beliefs and practices of the ancient Mediterranean world, taking into account their socio-historical settings. Such a study will not only increase our understanding of the development of ancient western civilization, but it should also help to elucidate some of the ways in which paganism influenced early Christianity and Judaism. The classical scholar A. D. Nock stated that

to determine with accuracy the influence on early Christianity of its Hellenistic background is impossible. Our material does not enable us to define in detail all the stages through which early Christianity developed, and we do not know the Hellenistic background nearly as well as we could wish.<sup>1</sup>

However, the chief goal of this book is not to clarify ways in which paganism influenced the Judeo-Christian religious tradition. Instead, it seeks to present the fundamental elements of the major religious faiths of the ancient Mediterranean world. Both the Judeo-Christian and non-Judeo-Christian religious traditions will be described. Taking a chronological approach, the book begins with a review of the religious traditions of the ancient Near East including the religions of ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt and Israel. After that, the pagan religions of the Greeks and Romans of the

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<sup>1</sup> A. D. Nock, *Early Christianity and Its Hellenistic Background*, (New York, 1964), p. 1.

archaic, classical, Hellenistic and Roman periods will be considered, followed by a historical description of the early Christian movement. Lastly, the personal religious experiences of a select number of pagan and Christian individuals of the Greco-Roman world will be examined.

At this preliminary juncture, the current enterprise needs to be situated against the background of previous scholarly research already done in this area of learning. Historical studies of ancient Mediterranean religions can be classified into three groups. The first type concentrates upon a single religious tradition within the overall religious landscape of the ancient world. On the one hand, some scholarly studies have narrowly focused upon a particular myth, doctrine, cult, ritual or religious figure within a single religious tradition. There are also numerous descriptive studies focusing upon one particular religious tradition within the ancient Mediterranean world. For example, there are multitudes of books about ancient Mesopotamian religion, ancient Egyptian religion, and ancient Judaism and Hellenistic religions. Comparative studies between two or more traditions have been conducted on occasion, but there are very few books which present a general overview of the entire religious topography of the ancient Mediterranean world. This gap can be partially explained by the vastness and diversity of the subject-area. The religions of the ancient Mediterranean world are made up of a wide variety of mythic orientations, theological doctrines, ritual activities, ethical belief systems and institutional arrangements spanning many centuries and geographic locations. In response to this incredible diversity, historical scholarship has been narrowly focused with clearly defined limits. Although these kinds of scholarly works may present accurate accounts of certain aspects of the particular religious tradition in question, they fail to consider the bigger picture of the religious environment of the ancient Mediterranean world. Usually, the restricted perspective of these kinds of books tends to reflect the author's specialized training in a particular area of expertise within the field of history or classical languages.<sup>2</sup>

A second type of scholarly study of ancient Mediterranean religions appears within the general context of a survey of world religions or ancient religions. Studies of this kind offer a good way for the beginning student to become acquainted with the religious traditions of the world, but unfortunately little time is spent on ancient Mediterranean religions, *per*

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<sup>2</sup> See Luther H. Martin, *Hellenistic Religions: An Introduction*, (New York, 1987); Franz Cumont, *Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism*, (New York, 1956); Sir Wallis Budge, trans. and ed., *Egyptian Religion*, (New York, 1994); Birger Pearson *Ancient Gnosticism: Traditions and Literature*, (Minneapolis, Mn., 2007).

se.<sup>3</sup> These studies may contain one or two chapters related to ancient Mediterranean religions, such as a chapter on early Christianity, the religious cults of Greece or Rome or a chapter on ancient Egyptian religion or ancient Judaism. Not enough time is spent on these individual subjects due to the broad scope of the book. Since this type of book usually presents an introduction to the major religious traditions of the contemporary world such as Christianity, Islam or Buddhism, little time is available for an extended discussion of the religions of the ancient past, especially since these religious traditions are often seen as having little relevance in today's world.

A third type of book on ancient Mediterranean religious traditions presents a collection of essays in a single volume on a particular subject written by different authors. These books rely upon the specialized knowledge of its individual authors and include expert discussions of many of the significant aspects of the religious traditions of the ancient past. Since these types of books represent a compilation of individual essays, frequently they fail to provide a comprehensive perspective.<sup>4</sup>

Given this state of affairs, a descriptive introduction to the religious traditions of the ancient Mediterranean world is sorely needed. Due to the complexities of this material, the goal of the current work is to give the beginning students an intellectual roadmap to guide them through this vast and complex area of study. A number of fascinating religious beliefs and practices will be explained, without getting bogged down with too many technical details or controversial discussions. In many ways, the history of the ancient Mediterranean civilizations is also the story of the rise and fall of its various religious traditions. This is true because religion is inextricably tied to society. Along with the development of government, urbanization, social classes and writing, religion is one of the primary building blocks of civilization. From a temporal and geographic standpoint, providing such a descriptive account of ancient religion is a truly daunting task since it covers such a vast area. In order to provide illumination and avoid confusion, some clear guidelines need to be established at the outset regarding what will be included and what will be left out. Current knowledge about ancient history is limited by the available resources existing within the literary record and previously made archeological discoveries. By necessity, a selective approach to the available material needs to be taken. A variety of representative primary

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<sup>3</sup> See Ninian Smart, *The Religious Experience*, (New Jersey, 1996).

<sup>4</sup> Michele Renee Salzman and Marvin Sweeney, eds., *Cambridge History of Religions in the Ancient World*, 2 vols., (Cambridge, 2013); Sarah Iles Johnston, ed., *Religion in the Ancient World*, (Cambridge, 2004).

sources will be examined including various myths, poetry, letters, inscriptions and various theological and philosophical documents. When appropriate, various secondary sources will be consulted.

## Defining Religion

Since this book focuses upon religion viewed from a historical perspective, a definition of the term “religion” needs to be provided.<sup>5</sup> A cursory examination of the many definitions of religion proposed within the scholarly community reveals a couple of things. The historian and phenomenologist Mircea Eliade has concluded that

all the definitions up till now of the religious phenomenon have one thing in common: each has its own way of showing that the sacred and the religious life are the opposite of the profane and the secular life. But as soon as you start to fix limits to the notion of the sacred you come upon difficulties.<sup>6</sup>

Eliade continues by stating that any evidence of religion in its “pure state” and representative of its historical origins “is nowhere to be found...Almost everywhere the religious phenomena we see are complex, suggesting a long historical evolution.”<sup>7</sup> Obviously, Eliade believes that religion has to do with the realm of the sacred, but providing an exact definition of the term “sacred” is difficult. Eliade concludes that in the final analysis, the “sacred” exists in a dialectic relationship with the “profane” and all that one can say about the meaning of the term “sacred” is that it is the opposite of the profane.

Because of the confusion associated with the term “religion”, some scholars of religion have even doubted the value of employing this troublesome term in their studies. For these scholars the term has become an overused intellectual construct used by a generation of scholars seeking to establish the autonomy of the academic study of religion. Even though the term has utility, employing it does not mean that the definition cannot be modified in the future, if a re-formulation is necessary. Hence, it is best to consider any definition of religion in provisional terms. In developing a

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<sup>5</sup> See Jan Platvoet and Arie Molendijk, eds., *The Pragmatics of Defining Religion: Contexts, Concepts and Contests*, (Leiden, 1999) for a discussion of the problem of defining religion. See also W. Richard Comstock, *The Study of Religion and Primitive Religion*, (New York, 1972), pp. 18-27.

<sup>6</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, (New York, 1963), p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

working definition of the term, it is worth noting the comments of Peter Berger. In his classic book on the sociology of religion entitled *The Sacred Canopy*, Berger states that when considering a definition of religion, the main thing that needs to be remembered is that

Definitions cannot, by their very nature, be either ‘true’ or ‘false’, only more useful or less so. For this reason, it makes relatively little sense to argue over definitions. If, however, there are discrepancies between definitions in a given field, it makes sense to discuss their respective utility.<sup>8</sup>

In keeping with Berger’s point of view, the search for a definition of “religion” should be guided in terms of its usefulness for achieving the objectives of the particular study in question.

Presenting a description of the pagan and Judeo-Christian religions of ancient Mediterranean civilization reveals the extent to which these traditions are inextricably connected to certain historical, social and economic forces and trends existing within the ancient world. Prior to situating these religious traditions in their socio-historical context, the term “religion” needs to be defined in a way that is suitable for the current project. A good place to begin is a look at the etymology of the word “religion”. The etymological origins of the word religion can be traced back to the Latin word “religio” which can be translated as “rite”, that is, the outward performance of very important practices. Obviously, in modern times the meaning and usage of the term has evolved beyond its original etymological origins. Rather than using the term in reference to specific actions or ritual acts of a particular cult, the term is usually used in modern times in a broader sense to refer to the beliefs and practices that appear with a particular society. In modern parlance, the term “religion” can refer to specific religious traditions such as Hinduism and Christianity or the term can be used in a general sense to refer to all the different religions of the world. However, in order to classify various systems of thought and behavior as specific examples of religious systems, a working definition of the term “religion” is required in order to perform such a classification. As a result, scholars have made several suggestions for defining this term.

One definition of religion that gained popular support was proposed by the nineteenth-century anthropologist Edwin Tyler. For Tyler, religion is defined as simply “the belief of spirits”. In 1871 Tyler published his

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<sup>8</sup> Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*, (Garden City, New York, 1967), p. 175.

epoch-making book entitled *Primitive Religion* in which his theory of animism was introduced. Clearly, Tyler's anthropological study of primitive religion was the basis for his theory of animism and his definition of religion. According to Tyler, primitive man believed that everything in the world possessed a soul and this belief explained not only the birth of the cult of the dead, but the origin of the gods as well. According to Tyler, religion slowly evolved out of these primitive, animistic roots. The theory of pre-animism, developed by R. R. Marrett in 1900, was an offshoot of Tyler's theory of animism. Pre-animism held that the origin of religion was the result of the belief in an impersonal force called *mana*.

Clearly, the simplicity of these two definitions has its advantages. Each definition found support among many scholars of religion in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. However, on the downside, some scholars thought that Tyler's theory of religion was an oversimplification. Defining religion as a form of animism was not all-encompassing enough to permit the inclusion of certain types of religious phenomena for study. For example, to characterize the Hellenistic mystery-religions as a form of animism is misleading. The same thing would be true for the lofty theological speculations of the Greek philosopher Plato or Plotinus. Defining religion as "belief in spirits" is useful in some limited respects, but in many contexts it is clearly too narrow a focus for encompassing the broad array of religious phenomena in the ancient western world.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century and in the beginning of the twentieth century several other definitions of religion were proposed by various scholars. One such definition of religion was suggested by the noted sociologist Emile Durkheim.<sup>9</sup> In *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* Durkheim provides a sociological definition of religion. According to Durkheim, religion, in its most elementary state, is a form of totemism. Durkheim's understanding of religion was based upon his research of various North American Indian tribes. For example, among the Ojibwa Indians of North America, the term "totem" stands for the animal which is a symbol of the clan and also represents the clan's ancestor. Durkheim and his followers claimed that totemism or the belief in totem spirits represented the original form of religion. However, Durkheim's definition was criticized by Sir James Frazier who showed that totemism was not a universal phenomenon, but prevailed only in a limited number of historical contexts; as a result, Durkheim's sociological definition of religion was eventually dismissed.

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<sup>9</sup> Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans., Karen E. Fields, (New York, 1995).

Besides various sociological and anthropological definitions of religion, others have sought to define religion in psychological terms. One such approach was taken by the German religious scholar Rudolf Otto. Otto understood religion on an experiential level and this understanding is reflected in his definition of religion. Instead of focusing upon various philosophical conceptions of God and the rational side of religious activity, Otto focused upon the irrational, spiritual dimension and the presence of the “living God” in people’s lives. In his book entitled *The Idea of the Holy* Otto described the fundamental nature of religious experience. He pointed out that when individuals from a variety of historical and cultural contexts come into contact with the holy, they all experience the same type of intense emotional responses, characterized by feelings of awe and wonder.<sup>10</sup> Humans experience a feeling of fear or even terror before the sacred, the awe-inspiring mystery (*mysterium tremendum*), coupled with a feeling of fascination (*mysterium fascinans*). According to Otto, religious experience has a numinous quality and the numinous always presents itself as distinctly different or “wholly other” from ordinary experience. The experience of “the holy” serves as the foundation for Otto’s definition of religion. Religion comes into being as a response to certain feelings of awe and wonder experienced by the individual in the presence of the sacred. Otto also argues that the realm of the holy is a distinct and autonomous realm that is qualitatively different from the realm of the profane.

Some scholars such as William James have criticized the idea that such a distinct religious emotion exists. In spite of the criticism, there is a certain amount of heuristic value in making this sacred/profane distinction since it treats “religion” as an autonomous category of human experience and allows for analyzing the phenomenon of religion as an independent agent in history.<sup>11</sup> This is an important point because one of the primary objectives of this book is to describe the complex ways in which religious institutions and ideas had an impact on the development of ancient society.

Based upon a review of the various definitions of religion proposed by Tyler, Durkheim, Otto and other scholars, it is clear that any potential definition of this term has limitations. Nevertheless, it is necessary to develop a working definition for research purposes. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, the term religion will be defined *as the collection of myths, beliefs, rituals, ethical practices, social institutions and experiences*

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<sup>10</sup> Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, (London, 1923).

<sup>11</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, (London, 2002).

*related to the realm of the sacred cosmos.*<sup>12</sup> The virtue of this definition is that it clearly recognizes the fact that religion has different strands and that it is an important element of culture. As a human institution, religion is one of the basic components of the *weltanschauung* (world-view) of society and it is not merely a by-product of something else such as the “belief in spirits” or a feeling of “awe and wonder”. Further, such a definition of religion does not pass judgment on certain types of religiosity as being either culturally superior or inferior to other types of religion.

Another advantage of defining religion in terms of different strands such as myths, rituals, ethics, institutions and experiences is that it recognizes the diversity of religious ideas and practices existing in the ancient Mediterranean world. Certain religious traditions placed more emphasis upon the interpretation of the sacred myths as opposed to ritual practices such as that found in ancient Greek religion; in still other cases, more emphasis was placed upon ethical practices and moral codes such as in Babylonian religion. In the case of ancient Etruscan religion, more attention was given to rites as opposed to the other strands of religion. All of the previously mentioned traditions are “religious” in the sense that reference is made to a sacred cosmos, but in each case greater emphasis is placed upon a particular strand or dimension of religion such as myth or ritual. This emphasis upon one dimension of religion such as the mythic dimension or ritual dimension does not suggest that one tradition should be considered more or less religious than another.

Our definition recognizes differences in the nature of religious experience between one historical period and another. In the early stages of ancient Mediterranean civilization, religious institutions were tied to the state and the existing socio-political order. This does not mean that religion did not exist in ancient times.<sup>13</sup> Instead, archaic religion expressed itself in different terms to the way it was articulated in Hellenistic times. In this sense, the collective dimension of religion took precedence in archaic times, with less emphasis placed upon individual religious experience. Personal religious feelings were not completely unknown in archaic or classical times, nor were all of the religious activities of this historical time period entirely of a civic nature.<sup>14</sup> The Egyptian peasant or a plebian of the

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<sup>12</sup> See Ninian Smart’s discussion of the different strands of religion in *The Religious Experience*, pp. 3-7.

<sup>13</sup> Brent Nongbri discusses this issue in his *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept*, (New Haven, 2015).

<sup>14</sup> For more on personal religious feelings in classical times see A. J. Festugiere’s introduction to his *Personal Religion among the Greeks*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1954).

Roman Republic must have occasionally experienced inner feelings of closeness to the divine while performing various traditional rituals. Nevertheless, the customary forms of religious worship of the earliest civilizations were usually tied to public institutions. Due to several socio-historical and philosophical developments, the personal nature of religious experience begins to become more prominent later in Hellenistic-Roman times.

## **Overview of the Book**

The concluding section of this chapter will outline the contents of the book. Each chapter focuses upon a particular religious tradition existing within the broad framework of the ancient Mediterranean religious traditions. At the end of the book a bibliography appears. The first chapter presents a summary of the contents of the book. A review of prior scholarly research in the area of ancient Mediterranean religions is given and some of the problems associated with defining the term “religion” are discussed. In addition, a working definition of the term “religion” is provided. Chapter Two offers a historical description of fundamental beliefs and practices of ancient Mesopotamian religious traditions. The fundamental aspects of Sumerian cosmology and Babylonian divinatory practices are discussed. Particular attention is paid to the high god Marduk. Several important myths are examined including the Gilgamesh Epic and the Enuma Elish. Chapter Three focuses upon the religious traditions of ancient Egypt. Here the basic components of the ancient Egyptian faith are described. At the very center of ancient Egyptian religion is the ominous figure of the pharaoh, the divine intermediary who stands between the world of the gods and the world of human beings. In this context, the mysterious Pharaoh Akhenaten and his monotheistic cult of Aten are examined. In turning to the ancient gods of the Egyptian pantheon, many of their attributes are described. The *Pyramid Texts* and *Coffin Texts* represent two important primary sources for understanding ancient Egyptian religious conceptions of immortality and the afterlife. These topics and others are explored including the significance of mummification and the opening of the mouth ceremony. Chapter Four focuses upon the fundamental elements of ancient Judaism. The chapter begins with a discussion of the origin and development of the nation of Israel and a description of the Biblical view of creation. Other topics include the Mosaic Covenant, the Prophetic tradition, Job and the problem of evil and suffering and the varieties of Palestinian Judaism. Following the discussion of the religions of the ancient Near East, the focus shifts to

the western Mediterranean region. In Chapter Five the religions of classical Greece are explored. The roots of classical Greek religion are found in Minoan-Mycenaean culture. Our discussion of Minoan-Mycenaean religion centers upon the cult of the Great Mother and Homeric conceptions of the afterlife. The religion of the polis and the gods of Olympus gain ascendancy in classical times. In this context the divine attributes of the Olympian gods are described as well as some of the cults and religious practices associated with the gods. The Delphic oracle and a few other important oracles are also examined. Other lesser gods and divine heroes such as the healer god Asclepius along with his cult are also examined. In turning to Greek philosophy, the doctrines of the Pre-Socratics, the Skeptics, the Orphics and the Platonists, are described insofar as they relate to the key religious issues of the classical period. Special attention is given to the doctrine of the immortality of the soul. Chapter Six focuses upon ancient Roman religion. The highlights of this chapter include a discussion of the Etruscan influence on Roman religion, an examination of the pre-Julian calendar and an analysis of divination and Roman belief in the numina. In Chapter Seven, the religious developments of the Hellenistic-Roman Period (450 BCE-400 CE) are reviewed. A number of religious trends are identified, including the rising interest in astrology, magic and Hellenistic mystery religions. Chapter Eight examines several topics including Augustus' restoration of the traditional Roman religion, the rise of the cult of the ruler and the chief representatives of Hellenistic philosophy. Special attention is given to Stoic philosophy and the theological views of Epicurus, Epictetus and Marcus Aurelius. With the demise of the traditional state religion during Hellenistic-Roman times, Greco-Roman philosophy became a quasi-religion for many members of the upper class. Chapter Nine traces the rise of Christianity from its humble roots in Palestine as an apocalyptic Jewish sect to becoming the official religion of the Roman Empire. The discussion begins with the Synoptic Gospels which record many biographical details about the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Next, the life and theological views of St. Paul are examined. The schism between Jewish and Hellenistic Christianity is explored along with various heretical movements within the Church such as Gnosticism and Manichaeism. In addition, the monastic tradition is discussed, along with the persecution and martyrdom of Christians. Certain theological controversies such as the Arian Controversy are also examined. Chapter Ten focuses upon the development of "personal religion" in the Greco-Roman world. A number of pagan and Christian individuals have been selected for the purposes of our study of individual religious experience. These individuals include the

Neo-Pythagorean philosopher Apollonius of Tyana, Alexander the Quack prophet, the multifaceted Peregrinius, the Christian martyr St. Perpetua, the Greco-Roman pagan sophist Aelius Aristides, the Gnostic Zostranios, Neo-platonic philosophers Plotinus and Iamblichus and lastly, the eminent Christian Church father, St. Augustine. In Chapter Eleven, the conclusions of the study will be presented.

## CHAPTER TWO

### ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIAN RELIGION

#### **The Characteristics of Religion in Ancient Mesopotamian Society**

In this chapter the fundamental characteristics of ancient Mesopotamian religion will be described. A few ancient religious texts will be cited for the purposes of illustration.<sup>1</sup> Many Sumerian cuneiform tablets contain descriptions of the political organizations and administrative institutions of the ancient city-state. A number of religious and mythological issues are indirectly mentioned. Since these tablets were associated with the temple, a variety of things were included on them such as lists of kings, various spells and incantations, information about divination and astrology as well as texts detailing religious rituals and legends. From these early cuneiform records dating from as early as 3000 BCE, a fairly accurate picture of Sumerian religious practices can be seen.

The Sumerian documents are helpful for clarifying the nature of Babylonian and Assyrian religious practices. Many Sumerian religious traditions continued to be practiced in a relatively unchanged form in later times. Many Sumerian myths and religious texts were copied and preserved in later Babylonian and Assyrian versions of the stories. There was a great deal of cultural continuity between the Sumerian, Akkadian, Assyrian and Babylonian Empires. This continuity extended into many sectors of society including the religious arena. In reviewing the history of

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<sup>1</sup> An excellent overview of ancient Sumerian religion appears in Samuel Kramer's *The Sumerians: their History, Culture and Character*, (Chicago, 1963). For more on ancient Mesopotamian religion see Stephanie Dalley, *Myths of Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh and Others*, (Oxford, 2008); Benjamin Foster, *From Distant Days: Myths, Tales and Poetry of Ancient Mesopotamia*, (Bethesda, Maryland, 1995) and Daniel Snell, *Life in the Ancient Near East*, (New Haven, 1997). see also Ninian Smart's account of ancient Mesopotamian religion in his *The Religious Experience*, pp.180-186; see also *World Religions: From Ancient History to the Present*, edited by Geoffrey Parrinder, (New York, 1971), pp.114-130.

ancient Mesopotamia, many historians have noted numerous similarities between the Sumerian and Akkadian civilizations. Most of these parallels are explained as the result of cultural assimilation. This cultural intermixing continued to occur well into the Babylonian Period that began around 1800 BCE. There is enough cultural stability between these civilizations to refer to them collectively using the term “ancient Mesopotamian civilization”. Similarly, in the religious realm, it is appropriate to refer to “ancient Mesopotamian religion” because many spiritual beliefs and practices existing in Sumerian culture, continued to exist in relatively unaltered forms in later times within Akkadian, Assyrian or Babylonian society. There is enough thematic overlapping and parallelism between all of the civilizations of ancient Mesopotamia to allow historians to consider certain Sumerian documents such as the *Gilgamesh Epic* to be illustrative of the fundamental characteristics of “ancient Mesopotamian religion”. Many of these archaic documents continued to circulate in later Babylonian times. However, a few significant religious developments took place in the Babylonian period such as the worship of the high god Marduk and the growth of monotheism. However, it is fair to say that the Sumerians set the mold for the religious thinking of the Akkadians, Babylonians and Assyrians in many ways.

## Sumerian Cosmology

Samuel Kramer once said

On the intellectual level Sumerian thinkers and sages, as a result of their speculations on the origin and nature of the universe and its *modus operandi*, evolved a cosmology and theology which carried such high conviction that they became the basic creed and dogma of much of the ancient Near East.<sup>2</sup>

Sumerian cosmology represents the first dominant view of the world in the history of western civilization. A few revisions were made by others as time went on, but the Sumerian world-view essentially remained intact until Hellenistic times when the Ptolemaic world-view replaced the old way of seeing things. The Ptolemaic view proposed that the earth stood in the center of the cosmos, encircled by the sun, the moon and the stars. Initially, the Sumerians divided the universe into two parts. Above was heaven and below was the flat earth. Later, the Sumerians added the underworld to their picture of the cosmos. The earth (*Ki*) was conceived to

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<sup>2</sup> S. Kramer, *The Sumerians*, p. 112.

be a flat surface engulfed by a vast hollow space, the outer edge of which was made out of some unknown solid substance. Since the Sumerian term for tin is “the metal of heaven”, it is likely that the Sumerians believed that the walls of the universe were made from tin. A substance called *lil* or atmosphere filled in the empty space existing between the sky (*An*) and earth (*Ki*). All of the planets, the sun and moon dwelt in the *lil* and were made out of the same atmospheric substance. However, each of them had one additional quality which was luminosity. The Sumerians considered the ocean as the primary source and first cause of everything in the universe including the heavens and the earth. Emerging out of the unformed primordial space between the earth and heavens were the stars, the sun, the moon and the planets.

The Sumerians believed that a group of immortal deities possessing human personalities and physical attributes resided above the earth. The Sumerian gods had superhuman powers that enabled them to control things happening in the universe. The Sumerians conceived of their gods in very anthropomorphic terms. Just like human beings, the gods had loves and hates as well as strengths and weaknesses. They married and had children. Similar to the average person of Sumerian society, the Sumerian gods enjoyed eating and drinking. In a very human way, they developed various plans and carried out various strategies. Although the gods were considered to be immortal, they required food and water just like their human counterparts. They could become ill or suffer wounds in battle just like human beings. However, an important difference between the gods and human beings was that the gods were immortal, but humans were not.

In Sumerian culture, the activities of the gods were described in very human terms. The gods ruled the universe analogous to the way that earthly rulers ruled their kingdoms. The power structure of human society was justified because it duplicated the cosmic order of the gods. Just as there is a need for a strong ruler in the earthly sphere, likewise the gods played such a role on a celestial level. The only difference between the earthly rulers and heavenly rulers was a question of scope. Since the divine rulers governed a larger area than their earthly counterparts, it made logical sense to suppose that the powers of the gods were qualitatively greater. Unlike the earthly rulers, whose powers were limited by the laws of time and space, the gods had far greater supernatural powers. It required special powers for the gods to control all of the celestial bodies of the universe and such powers far outstripped the powers of the earthly Sumerian war-lords who oversaw the people. However, the idea of bestowing absolute political authority upon the rulers on earth was an alternate version of the divine powers given to the gods in heaven. Each of

the various natural forces of the earth such as the wind and rain was under the control of some deity in the Sumerian pantheon. Similarly, each of the natural geologic formations of the earth such as the rivers, mountains and lakes, as well as man-made artifacts such as the sword or farming tools such as a plow or hoe, was under the charge of some superhuman being. Just as earthly rulers were put in charge of monitoring the land, it was up to the gods of the universe to supervise the activities of the various items put under their control.

Just as there was a hierarchy of political authority within the various city-states of Sumer, a similar pecking-order existed within the Sumerian divine pantheon. Some gods wielded more power and prestige than others just as some human beings had a higher status within the social structure of Sumerian society. No one would ever think that the god who was put in charge of the plow would rank as high in the divine hierarchy as the god who was put in charge of a city-state or the sun. Each cosmic or cultural entity in Sumerian culture operated according to its own set of rules established by the divinity who created it. Furthermore, just as all the lesser earthly positions of authority yielded to the power and authority of the king, in a similar fashion all the inferior gods of the Sumerian pantheon recognized and gave deference to the high-god.

## **The Sumerian Pantheon**

The four most important Sumerian gods were An, the god of heaven, Enlil, the air-god, Enki, the water-god and Ninhursag, the great mother-goddess. In the history of Sumerian religion, various gods assumed the role of high-god. At one time, the name of the high-god was An, the god of heaven. Around 2500 BCE, the name of the high-god was Enlil whose temple, called the Ekur, was located in Nippur. Most scholars agree that among all of the gods of Sumer, Enlil was considered to be the most important. He was known as the “father of the gods” and the king of “heaven and earth”. Various Sumerian rulers and kings referred to the god Enlil as the one who gave them their kingship and wealth. It was through Enlil’s strength that rulers were able to conquer new lands and territories. He was considered to be the most beneficent deity and was responsible for creating the most productive aspects of the universe. Taking pity on humans, Enlil made sure that crops would grow. He also supplied humans with various tools such as the pickax and the plow. Besides An and Enlil, another important god was Enki, the god of the watery abyss who was also the god of wisdom and Enlil’s administrator. Whenever Enlil envisioned a plan for the earth, it was carried out by Enki. Enki was deeply involved in

the creation of various cultural phenomena on earth. The fourth important god of the Sumerian pantheon was the mother-goddess, Ninhursag. In the earliest times the mother-goddess of Sumer may have been considered to be even more important than Enki. She was the “mother of all things” and in some creation myths she played a part in the creation of humans. Other important Mesopotamian gods included Shamash, the sun-god who sped across the sky each day in his chariot, Ishtar, the Babylonian goddess of love and war and Marduk, the Babylonian high-god. Another important Assyrian god was Adad, the weather-god who rode storms on his thundering bull.

People addressed the gods through a variety of prayers and incantations. *Enki and the World Order* is one of the most important religious poems of Sumerian culture.<sup>3</sup> The prayer begins with a hymn of praise addressed to Enki, the god honored as the guardian of the universe and the provider of fertility. Then, Enki praises himself in the following verses:

I am the ‘big brother’ of the gods, I am he who brings full prosperity,  
 I am the record keeper of heaven and earth,  
 I am the ear and the mind of all the lands,  
 I am he who directs justice with the king An on An’s dais,  
 I am he who decrees the fates with Enlil in the ‘mountain of wisdom’....  
 I am the lord, I am one whose command is unquestioned, and I am the  
 foremost in all things.

A barely intelligible description of Enki’s rites follows. Afterwards, the action shifts to another location where Enki decrees the fate of a number of cities and gives each of them a proper blessing. Enki performs various actions designed to ensure the earth’s fertility. The Tigris River is filled with water, fish and reeds and the god Enbilulu is chosen to be the guardian of the rivers. Enki constructs his own shrine and puts the goddess Nanshe in charge of it. He causes vegetation to cover the land and brings various farming tools into existence. The god establishes the borders between all the cities and empires and installs a god to watch over each locality. At the end of the poem, the goddess Inanna complains that she has not been given any special divine tasks and Enki promises to rectify the situation by giving her an insignia and provinces.

Besides Enki, the high-god, there were several other gods who belonged to the Sumerian pantheon. Three important astral gods were Nanna, the moon-god, Utu, the sun-god and Nanna’s daughter, Inanna, who was referred to as Ishtar by the Semites. These three astral deities

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<sup>3</sup> Samuel Kramer, trans., *The Sumerians*, pp. 174-183.

along with the four previously mentioned gods, An, Enlil, Enki and Ninhursag, formed the seven gods who were responsible for a “decree of the fates”. The Sumerian pantheon was divided between the creative and non-creative gods, with the creative gods assuming more significance. Those gods in charge of heaven, earth, the sea and the atmosphere were considered to be the “creative” gods whose ability to create things was connected to the power to make pronouncements. Just as in human society, where levels of responsibility are tied to social status, those gods who were in charge of important things like fertility or the weather had more importance than other gods in charge of lesser things like a particular tool. The Sumerians explained the creativity of the gods by means of using an analogy for how things got done within Sumerian society. The king of the Sumerian city-state would make various commands and his subjects would carry out his decree. The gods operated in the same way. According to the Sumerian doctrine of creation, the god simply had to develop a plan and then speak the word. Once the god spoke the name of the thing being created, it would come into being.

## **Sumerian Creation**

The Sumerians believed that the gods made human beings out of clay. The Sumerians also believed that humans were created in order to serve the gods. The main purpose of human existence on earth was to please the gods by providing them with food and drink. In order to supply the gods with nourishment, the people of Sumer were required to scrimp and save. Besides feeding themselves and their children, the Sumerians had to feed the gods. The people had to learn to deny themselves by giving things to the gods instead of themselves. As a result, the Sumerians lived a rather sparse existence. The tasks of growing crops and raising cattle caused them to enter into a daily battle with the elements. The Sumerian climate had extreme temperatures and the land was barren and desolate. Little water was available for agriculture. There was the constant threat of surprise attack by hostile tribes. Because of these inhospitable factors, it comes as no surprise that the Sumerians perceived themselves as a fairly hopeless lot. Religiously speaking, the Sumerians felt human existence was filled with hopelessness and fear. There was little chance for anything better to be expected in the next life.

Given such a dismal view of this life and the next life, it was up to Sumerian religious institutions to help people come to terms with their pitiful situation. Among all the hostile forces at work in the ancient Mesopotamian world, death stood out as one of the worst, if not the worst,

of all of the many threats faced by people. Since death was perceived as the ultimate threat to humanity, it was up to religious institutions to provide a means for understanding and accepting this devastating event. Rather than offering any hope of a pleasant afterlife as in other later religious traditions, Sumerian religion offered little hope for such spiritual amenities. Life in the nether world was an awful experience for most souls.

## The Gilgamesh Epic

One of the most important myths of ancient Mesopotamia is *The Gilgamesh Epic*.<sup>4</sup> The story is about an individual named Gilgamesh who becomes involved in a mythic quest for immortality. Gilgamesh is the king of the great city-state of Uruk. He is two-thirds divine and one-third human. If Gilgamesh is considered to represent every person, then in a nutshell the myth helps to explain how it came to pass that for humans the possibility of immortality was lost forever. Coming to terms with humanity's finite lot in life is the underlying theme of this classic myth. Although the story was originally written in Akkadian, it was eventually translated into several Near Eastern languages and came to be one of the most famous masterpieces of ancient Near Eastern literature. In its original Akkadian form, it can be considered to be one of the earliest myths recorded in the history of western civilization.

At the beginning of the story, the people of Uruk are upset with Gilgamesh because he is causing problems throughout the city. Hoping to calm Gilgamesh down, Gilgamesh's mother, the goddess Aruna decides that Gilgamesh needs some company and so she creates a friend for him named Enkidu. Enkidu acts like a wild animal and needs to be tamed before he can go into the city of Uruk to meet Gilgamesh. Upon meeting, the two engage in a wrestling match. Afterwards, the two become good friends. One day Gilgamesh decides to go on a journey and he asks Enkidu to join him. Gilgamesh wants to find and kill Huwana, a dreadful creature that guards the cedar forest. On their way back home after slaying the creature, the goddess Ishtar sees Gilgamesh and asks him to marry her, but he rejects her proposal. Angered by the rejection, she tells the god Anu to get the sacred bull of heaven to attack and kill Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh and

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<sup>4</sup> I have used E. A. Speiser's translation of the *Gilgamesh Epic* which appears in James Pritchard's *Ancient Near East*, (Princeton, 1950), pp. 71-99; reprinted in Mircea Eliade, ed., *Essential Sacred Texts from around the World*, pp. 325-334. For more on the *Gilgamesh Epic* see Gwendolyn Leick, ed., *The Babylonian World*, Ch. 31, (New York, 2007).

Enkidu kill the bull causing the gods to become angry and so they decide that Enkidu must die. The death of Enkidu causes Gilgamesh to fall into a state of despair. For the first time he must face the reality of death. Gilgamesh learns that Utnapishtim is the only person in the world who knows how to become immortal and so Gilgamesh sets off on another journey to find the secret of eternal life. Finding Utnapishtim is not easy. There are several ordeals which Gilgamesh encounters. Entering into a strange, dark cave, Gilgamesh travels for eight leagues in total darkness. By the ninth league of his journey, he feels the north wind blowing on his face and by the eleventh league he finally comes out of the dark cave into the light. Along the way Gilgamesh encounters Siduri, the ale-wife who dwells by the deep sea. She warns him about his search for Utnapishtim and immortality by saying “Gilgamesh, whither rovest thou? The life thou pursuest thou shalt not find”.

Refusing to listen, Gilgamesh asks for directions to locate Utnapishtim across the sea, but Siduri tells him that no one has ever been able to cross the infinite Waters of Death. Nevertheless, she tells him about a boatman named Urshanabi who might be able to take him across the sea to Utnapishtim. Gilgamesh finds the boatman who takes him across the sea. Once there, Gilgamesh meets Utnapishtim who tells the tale of how he obtained immortality. Utnapishtim’s account is similar to the flood story found in the *Book of Genesis* in the Bible. A long time ago the gods destroyed the ancient city of Shuruppak by sending a great flood to consume the land. Utnapishtim was warned of impending doom by the god Ea and so he was able to survive the flood by constructing a large boat. In recognition of his creativity in the face of disaster and the fact that proper sacrifices were made, the gods bestowed the gift of immortality upon him. Following the revelation of the flood, Utnapishtim notices that Gilgamesh has fallen asleep. Utnapishtim decides to send him back home, but suddenly Utnapishtim’s wife shows pity for Gilgamesh and tells him about the miraculous plant of immortality growing at the bottom of the sea. Afterwards, Gilgamesh sets out on a search for the precious plant of immortality. However, after finding the plant, tragedy strikes; Gilgamesh accidentally loses the plant and immortality is lost forever.

This iconic story of Gilgamesh provides a mythic explanation for humanity’s tragic lot in life. The average Sumerian or Babylonian lived in an inhospitable environment. It made sense to him that the gods regarded him as nothing more than their servant, just as he was a servant of his earthly ruler. It was easy for the average Sumerian to accept the idea that only the gods could attain immortality and that the ultimate destiny for humanity was a dismal existence in the underworld. This was what the

people had come to expect based upon their earthly experiences. The basic job of the average citizen of Sumer was to serve the king and the gods without the expectation of receiving much in return in terms of a pleasant life in this world or the next. On occasion, the people would perform various rituals asking the gods, but not demanding, for some kind of divine help.

Just as human rulers had a good side and a bad side, so did the gods. The gods were seen to be in charge of human civilization and most of the time they tried to promote goodness, righteousness, truth and justice. However, by the same token, the gods were also regarded as the source of evil. In spite of this, the Sumerian people did not actually blame the gods for the existence of evil or their harsh life in the desert. Instead, there was a kind of unwilling acceptance of the inscrutable will of the gods. As Samuel Kramer explains, the Sumerians did not believe that it was a human being's role to complain or argue about their fate, but rather to wail, lament, and plead with the gods for mercy.<sup>5</sup> Most of the time, the gods would not listen to the cries of the humbled mortal beseeching the gods for justice and mercy anyway. Instead, the gods would simply ignore him. The gods were busy with many other things just like human beings and so they did not have time to respond to each and every complaint made by a suffering human. Because of this, the Sumerians developed the idea that each human had to appeal to his own personal divine intermediary who functioned as a sort of "guardian angel". It was through this personal god that the individual might find some kind of hope or "salvation".

Regardless of whether or not individuals felt a need to ask their divine intermediary for assistance, one thing was certain: there were definite limits to the divine assistance that was available. Death was inevitable for all human beings. Not even the gods could rescue human beings from this dismal fate. Furthermore, upon death, there was little hope for a pleasant afterlife.

### **Sumerian Funerary Practices and the Journey to the Underworld**

A few ancient tablets have been uncovered that clarify Sumerian funerary practices and conceptions of the afterlife. In Sumerian religion, little distinction was made between the souls of kings, aristocrats or peasants immediately following death. Presumably, whenever a person

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<sup>5</sup> Samuel Kramer, *The Sumerians*, p. 134.