

The Nature of the Ancient Near Eastern Gods

Throughout the Bible the people of Yahweh were immersed in a culture of paganism and idolatry, which had shaped them significantly before they came to put their faith in Yahweh and even after they joined the covenant community of Yahweh. The first five books of the Bible were written by Moses to a mixture of Israelite and Egyptian people groups who had just spent multiple generations living in a pagan culture and worshiping the pagan gods. After the Israelites settled in the land of Canaan, they continually embraced the paganism of the Canaanite culture in which they lived. This polytheistic paganism shaped the way they thought about everything. It was to these people and culture that Yahweh revealed Himself as the unique and sovereign creator and sustainer of everything, who wanted to redeem them and have a covenantal relationship with them.

In order to understand the imagery, ideas, and message of the Bible, one must understand first the cultural context of pagan gods that was the setting of the world and people of the Bible. How one views the gods or God shapes how one thinks about everything else in their life. An understanding of the pagan gods allows one to understand the worldview of the people of the Bible and thus understand the message of Yahweh to these people.

The Pagan Mythologies

To best understand the gods, one must begin with the stories the people told about their gods. We will look at the stories of the Babylonians, Canaanites, and Egyptians since these were the cultures the Israelites lived among and were influenced by. There are many mythologies that could be discussed, but we will look only at the most prominent.

The Babylonian Enuma Elish

The Babylonian creation story, *Enuma Elish*, tells of the demise of the primordial gods Apsu and Tiamat, who created the world. The story was written on seven tablets in the past tense and is well intact.

In the beginning there was neither sky nor earth, only the dark, chaotic primordial waters. All that existed were the watery gods Apsu and Tiamat within the void. Apsu was the primeval sweet-water, and his wife Tiamat was the saltwater ocean. These two gods mingled their waters together and birthed Lahmu and Lahamu, representing silt. Later Apsu and Tiamat birthed Anshar and Kishar, representing the horizon. Then Anshar and Kishar gave birth to a whole host of gods, one being Anu, the sky god, who gave birth to Ea, the god of wisdom, who was stronger and greater than his father.

These younger gods were so rowdy and loud that Apsu and Tiamat were greatly distressed by them. Apsu yelled at the gods to be quiet, but they ignored him. Taking with him his vizier, Mummu, Apsu went to Tiamat to convince her to destroy these new gods because they made so much noise he could not sleep. But Tiamat was angry and unwilling to destroy what they had created. So Apsu and Mummu left together to plot the destruction of the gods. The other gods heard them speaking and were filled with fear. However, Ea learned of their plan and crafted a magical spell that put Apsu and Mummu to sleep, stole Apsu's might and splendor, killed Apsu in his sleep, and chained up Mummu. Ea established himself as supreme ruler over the other gods and set up his palace within the dead body of Apsu. Ea and his wife Damkina gave birth to

Marduk, an amazing god of beauty, majesty, and power. Marduk was so perfect and glorious that he had double the godhood of other gods. He was tall, with amazing arms, and had four eyes, four ears, and a mouth that spewed fire. Ea gave him the four winds to wield at his own will. And all the other gods stared at him and talked about how amazing this god was.

The commotion of the gods was even greater now, and some of the other gods went to Tiamat, asking why she put up with them, since they had killed her lover and now were even worse. Tiamat agreed, convened with her council, and then gave birth to demon monsters—serpents with venom in their blood, fierce dragons that shot out beams of light, a horned serpent, fish men, bull men, and more. She then created eleven other demon serpents. She made Kingu to be general over her forces and gave him magical spells and the “Tablet of Destinies” so that he would have power over fate itself. Then, to ensure his loyalty, she made him her lover.

When Ea and the other gods heard of this, they were crippled with fear. Ea could not imagine why Tiamat would be upset with what he had done, and he went to Anshar and told him what was coming. Anshar’s liver shriveled up in fear, and he blamed everything on Ea. Ea flattered Anshar to get him back on his side and then reminded him that if he had not killed Apsu then they would all be dead. Anshar was swayed and told Ea to go to Tiamat and calm her down with flattering words. But when Ea went to Tiamat, he saw that she was still extremely angry, so he turned away in fear and told Anshar to send someone else. So Anshar sent his son Anu, but Anu returned in the same way as Ea.

Ea and Anshar then called upon Marduk to do it. Marduk rose up with great confidence to conquer Tiamat. However, he demanded first that he be made the supreme ruler over all gods and be given the power over fate. They agreed and gave him the throne over the gods. They then tested his powers by setting up a constellation of stars and asking him to turn them off and on. Marduk spoke, and they vanished; he spoke again, and their light returned. The gods were satisfied, and Marduk announced it was time for war, or what he called the path of prosperity and success. Ea gave Marduk a thunder club, a bow, and arrows. Marduk then set lightning before himself, filled his body with fire, and made a net to trap Tiamat. Then he wrapped himself in the four winds, and fashioned powerful, evil winds for his battle. In his lips he held a spell, and in one hand he grasped an herb to counter poison. Marduk mounted his chariot, the storm unequalled for terror, and pulled by four mythological and ferocious horses. He then set out to face Tiamat, who was portrayed as a large dragon.

Marduk’s great whirlwind threw Kingu and his minions into confusion, and they fled. Tiamat then used “womanly magic” of lies and deceit to confuse him. Marduk wavered in his chariot, but he was able to resist. He then condemned her for rejecting motherly love and trying to kill them. Tiamat responded in a screaming fury of rage and charged at Marduk with her mouth open, ready to devour him. Marduk wrapped her in his net, sent his evil wind and then all the winds into her mouth to blow her up, and shot her with an arrow that pierced her belly and killed her. Marduk then chased down the sea monsters and dragons and imprisoned them in the deep. He imprisoned Kingu and took the “Tablet of Destinies” from him.

Marduk smashed Tiamat’s head with a mace and split her body in half. He took one half of her watery body and bolted it to the roof of the sky, assigning a guard to hold it firmly in place. He then created land to imprison the other half of the waters of Tiamat to ensure they could never escape, bounding them into oceans. Marduk then began to create the world order. He created thrones for the gods to rule over creation and placed the stars in the sky for each of the greatest

gods. From two ribs of Tiamat, Marduk created the east and west, and with her liver, he created the pole star. He built gates in the east and west for the sun to enter and depart, established the sun and the moon to govern the day and night, and created the calendar so that he could rule over time itself. From Tiamat's spit, he formed clouds, rain, and fog. He heaped a mountain over Tiamat's head, piercing her eyes from which sprung the sources for the Tigris and Euphrates rivers (in Akkadian, *inu* means both "eyes" and "springs"). In a similar way, he heaped mountains over her udder, piercing it to make the rivers that flow from the eastern mountains into the Tigris. He bent her tail up to the sky to make the Milky Way, and her crotch he used to support the sky.

For reasons that are unclear he gave the "Tablet of Destinies" to Anu. He then turned the eleven demon serpents into statues to guard the Apsu temple for all time. The gods threw a feast for him, praised his name over and over, and promised eternal submission. Marduk then created his palace between the skies of heaven and the waters of the Apsu and named his new dwelling palace Babylon, which means "gate of heaven."

Marduk told Ea of his great miracle that he wanted to do. He would create a savage race of slaves from clay and blood and force them to do all the work so the gods could just relax and feast all the time. The gods would call them *humans*, and their lives would be horrible for the benefit of the gods. Ea said it was a great plan, but they would need blood from one of the gods. So Marduk slew Kingu, and out of his blood he created humanity to serve and feed the Babylonian gods.

Then Marduk split the gods in half, assigning 300 to various positions in the heavens and 300 to various positions in the earth. The gods then created the great temple-ziggurat of Babylon for all the gods to hang out in, and they established shrines in the temple for each one of them. They then threw a great feast and recited the glorious fifty names of Marduk and commanded humans to memorize and recite them each year.

The primary purpose of the *Enuma Elish* is to offer cosmological reasons for Marduk's rise as supreme and undisputed ruler and thus his right to be creator. The recitation of the *Enuma Elish* during the Babylonian New Year's Festival suggests that Marduk's celebrated mastery was not a given, but that through the community's recitation, Marduk's sovereignty over the world was renewed.¹

The Ugaritic Ba'al Cycle

There is no known Canaanite creation account. What we have is the Ugaritic Ba'al Cycle, which tells of how Ba'al, the god of the storm and fertility, conquered Yamm, the god of the sea and rivers, and then Mot, the god of death and underworld. The story is written on four tablets in the present tense, and there are many places where text is broken off or worn, creating many gaps in the story. In the Ugaritic Ba'al Cycle, creation and humans already exist, and the most high god, El, also known as the Bull god, is ruling over the gods and creation.

The first portion of the first tablet is badly damaged, so the story opens in the middle of a conflict between Ba'al and Yamm. They were powerful gods who had authority over some other gods and parts of creation. In this section, El and Yamm are talking about ambushing Ba'al, tying him up, and attacking him in the loins. Why they oppose him is not clear.

¹ See Jon D. Levenson. *Creation and Chaos and the Persistence of Evil*, p. 7.

The text is lost and resumes with El holding a feast for all the gods. El announces that Yamm is to become his heir. Yamm then gives a speech and announces that he will dethrone Ba'al, and if he fails, then Ba'al will get revenge on all the gods at this banquet, so they had better back him.

The text is lost and resumes with El commanding his messengers to go to Egypt to summon Kothar-wa-Khasis (meaning "Skillful-and-Wise")—a craftsman, engineer, and magician—to come to Canaan and build a massive palace for Yamm. Then the messengers give him the sacred word from El. In response, Kothar runs quickly to the palace of El and kneels before him. El commands him to build a palace for Yamm, and he leaves to do it.

The first portion of the second tablet is badly damaged, and the story begins with some minor gods talking about the palace of Yamm and how they are going to have to submit to him.

The text resumes with Ba'al sending a message to Yamm about how he did not insult El and Yamm, but it is Yamm who rebelling against his rightful authority. Ba'al proceeds to threaten Yamm and curse him. Yamm then sends his messengers to El. When the messengers arrive, all the other gods bow to them because they are an extension of Yamm. Ba'al is there and refuses to bow down, rebuking the others for doing so and commanding them to stand. Impressed by Ba'al's courage, they do what he says. The messengers speak Yamm's demands that the gods are to seize and hand over Ba'al so that Yamm can take everything that is Ba'al's. El agrees and declares that Ba'al is to be the slave of Yamm. Ba'al becomes enraged, pulls out two swords, and kills the messengers of Yamm. Anat (the sister of Ba'al), the war-goddess of passion and desire, and Asherah, the mother goddess of fertility, restrain Ba'al. El then declares that Ba'al is to be handed over to Yamm for justice. Somehow Ba'al escapes.

When the text resumes, Ba'al and Yamm are face to face, screaming at and insulting each other. The gods are divided in whose sides they have taken. Kothar declares that Ba'al is the great cloud rider, that all he has to do is smash Yamm and he can take eternal kingship. Kothar then fashions two magical weapons, Yagarish ("Chaser") and Ayamari ("Driver"). He tosses Yagarish to Ba'al, who hurls it at Yamm, striking him in the torso. Kothar then tosses Ayamari to Ba'al, who catches it while still in motion and brings it down on Yamm's head right between the eyes, killing him. Ba'al then begins to hack Yamm to pieces. The goddess Astarte, who was on Yamm's side, rebukes Ba'al. Ba'al responds by hacking Yamm into even smaller pieces and scattering them. The gods then celebrate that Yamm is dead and cheer for Ba'al as king.

The first portion of the third tablet is badly damaged, so the story begins with Ba'al giving a great feast in celebration of his triumph on his sacred Mount Zaphon. The main servant god is serving Ba'al an incredibly large cup of wine, which takes a thousand pitchers to fill up. He then takes a tambourine and begins to sing of how great Ba'al is, while Ba'al is looking at his daughters of light and rain and thinking how they will make great brides.

The text resumes with Ba'al's sister Anat finishing putting on makeup and perfume. She then descends the mountain, steps into a war between two great Canaanite cities, and begins to slaughter both sides for the pleasure of it. Their heads roll beneath her, and their hands fly above her like locusts. She hangs heads on her back, binds hands to her belt, and wades in blood up to her knees; she is neck deep in gore and viscera. Anyone who wants to surrender she beats with her club. Anat returns home dripping in blood, yet she is still not satisfied. She gives a great feast and begins to slaughter her guests and eat them. Her innards swell with laughter, and her heart fills with joy. The palace is then washed of its blood, and the oil of peace is poured out into

bowls. Anat washes her hands in warrior blood and then takes a shower and puts on makeup and perfume. She then picks up a lyre and sings of Ba'al and his three lovely daughters.

While she is in the middle of her song, Ba'al sends messengers to Anat. Assuming Ba'al is under attack, Anat begins to tremble and shouts at the messengers, "What great enemy rises up against the cloud rider?" She is upset that she is being bothered again and lists all the great foes she has vanquished for Ba'al, including the seven-headed sea serpent. The messengers tell her that Ba'al is not under attack, that things are so peaceful that Ba'al wants her to be at peace now and to fill the land with love. If she hurries over, Ba'al will teach her a secret word of power. With no fuss at all, she agrees, puts an end to her wars, and rushes over to Ba'al's palace.

Ba'al then whines that he wants a giant palace. Anat goes to El and politely asks for permission for Ba'al to build a palace. Then she suddenly begins to threaten El, saying she will drag him to the ground like a lamb and make his grey hairs run with blood if he does not give Ba'al a house. El then sighs, replying that no one can resist her when she is in one of her moods, so he gives in to her request and says everyone needs to celebrate Ba'al.

The story shifts to Asherah weaving, and then she makes an offering to El. When she sees Ba'al and Anat coming, she convulses in fear and demands to know who they have come to kill this time. But Ba'al and Anat are coming with gifts for her. Asherah's eyes light up, and she begins to monologue about how great she is. Ba'al then tells her about another god who offended him, and he wants to deal with him. Asherah tells him to take his complaint to El, but Ba'al says they have come to her because El is more likely to listen to her. She agrees to go to El on their behalf. Asherah and Anat get to the feast of El at the same time. El then asks Asherah whether she has come to enjoy the drink of the feast or wants to have sex with him, and does his love as a bull arouse her? Asherah ignores him, praises El, declares how great Ba'al is, and then declares that Ba'al deserves a palace. El is somewhat annoyed but agrees and commands Kothar to build a palace for Ba'al.

Kothar then begins to build a massive and luxurious palace for Ba'al. Kothar notices there are no windows in the plans for Ba'al's palace and says he should have some. Ba'al refuses the idea because it would just allow someone to look at his daughters when they are in the shower. After seven days, the palace is finished, and a fire is set in the central hearth and burns for seven days. The fire consumes the entire house and transforms it and everything inside into much finer divine materials, and then Ba'al has a great feast. After this, Ba'al goes down to the mortal world and captures ninety cities in an invasion and parade. He then sits on his throne on top of Mount Zaphon, covered with clouds. He tells Kothar that he does want a window, to which Kothar replies, in essence, "I told you so." Kothar builds a massive window, which Ba'al uses to shout his commands to the world, which causes a thunderous tremble across creation.

Tablet three begins with Ba'al giving a mighty speech to the entire world through his new window. Then Ba'al cries out to Mot, the god of death and the underworld. Ba'al demands that Mot surrender to him. Ba'al then sends his messengers to Mot in his palace in the pit of the underworld, demanding Mot come to his feast and submit to Ba'al as absolute ruler. Mot sends his messengers back, saying he will come to the feast and will then stab Ba'al. Mot has been holding a grudge against Ba'al for killing Lotan, the seven-headed sea serpent. Mot then describes all the ways he will eat Ba'al. Ba'al, the mightiest of the gods and the cloud rider, becomes very afraid and sends his messengers to declare that he will surrender to Mot and will forever be his servant. Mot gives a long speech that is mostly lost. Ba'al goes to Mot's feast and

flatters Mot. Then Mot tells Ba'al to go to the other gods and tell them how great Mot is. So Ba'al walks into the palace of El and proclaims to all the gods how great Mot is. Mot then orders Ba'al to come down, with his entire family and all his possessions, into the grave. Ba'al responds by having sex with a cow 640 times in the fields of Mot. The cow gives birth to a boy, whom Ba'al lavishes with many gifts. Then Ba'al goes down into the grave, where Mot rips him apart into many pieces and eats him alive. Ba'al's death brings a lack of rain and a famine.

When messengers inform El that Ba'al is dead, El falls off his throne, grieving and cutting himself in mourning. Anat, filled with grief, goes out slaughtering people. When she finds Ba'al's dead body, she mourns by cutting herself. Then Anat asks Shapshu, the lamp of heaven, to help her carry his body back to his palace; Shapshu agrees and helps her. The rain has ceased, and the soil and the fields are barren because of Ba'al's absence. El tries to find a replacement for Ba'al, but no one measures up.

After the passage of an unspecified amount of time, Anat finds and seizes Mot. The text says with a sword she splits him, with a sieve she winnows him, with a fire she burns him, with a millstone she grinds him, in a field she sows him, the birds consume his flesh, and flesh to flesh cries out. This means Mot is not really dead, but his pieces will have to seek each other out in order for him to become whole again, which will take time. This also means Ba'al is not really dead either. Death is not an event but a condition.

El has a dream that it is raining, meaning Ba'al is still alive somewhere, and he is overjoyed. El tells Anat the good news, who tells Shapshu to find Ba'al and bring him back, which she does. Ba'al takes his throne on Mount Zaphon, and there is much celebrating. Ba'al then kills all those who had put themselves forward as his replacement while he was gone.

After seven years, Mot appears again. He complains that he has been humiliated and wants to make a deal. He says he wants to eat Ba'al but will settle for one of his brothers, or he will eat all the humans on the earth right this moment. Ba'al then sends Mot several minor gods, claiming they are his brothers, so Mot is deceived into whom he is eating.

The text breaks off, and when it resumes, Mot is screaming that Ba'al had deceived him into eating his own brothers. They face off with each other and then ram each other like antelopes, fighting for a long time, and then both fall to the ground. Mot concedes to Ba'al, Ba'al resumes his throne, and there is a great feast.

The Ba'al epic portrays Ba'al as having to defeat Yamm in order to earn his right to rule over creation. The Ba'al epic also explains the cycle of winter, summer, famine, and good times through the annual battle between Ba'al and Mot. Ba'al's victory is an act of salvation, which enables the created order to endure. Thus, Ba'al is not seen as the supreme and undisputed ruler as was with Marduk.

The Egyptian Creation Myth

In Egyptian mythology there are often different versions of the same story, with many variations and contradictions between them. Likewise, their stories evolved over time, and it is hard to know which version is the earliest and original. Of three known Egyptian creation myths, the creation myth of the city of Heliopolis is the oldest and most well-known.

In the beginning, there was only the dark, empty, endless, chaotic waters—called Nun. Out of the chaotic Nun arose a mountain of land, called a Ben-Ben, in the shape of a pyramid. At the same

time, the sun god Atum (later associated with Ra) willed himself into existence out of the Nun. Atum's name means both "Everything" and "Nothing." Atum was a hermaphrodite who contained all of masculinity and femininity within himself and stood as the sun at the top of the pyramid. Atum released the seed of life by having sex with himself, then spitting and sneezing Shu, the god of air, and the goddess Tefnut, the god of moisture, into existence.

Leaving their father Atum on the Ben-Ben to meditate on the nature of eternity, Shu and Tefnut set out to explore the Nun. After some time, Atum became concerned because his children had been gone for so long, so he removed his eye and sent it in search of them. While his eye was away, he created another eye to take its place. Shu and Tefnut later returned with the first eye of Atum. The returned eye, upon seeing the newly grown eye in Atum, became angry at its replacement. Atum then took the returned eye and placed it on his forehead, where it became the protective Udjat eye, the Eye of Ra, or the All-Seeing Eye—displayed on the crowns of the pharaohs. Atum was so grateful for Shu and Tefnut's safe return that he shed tears of joy, which fell onto the fertile soil of the Ben-Ben and grew into men and women. When ancient Egyptian creation accounts mention the creation of humankind at all, it is only in passing and is more of an afterthought.

Shu and Tefnut gave birth to Geb, the earth god, and Nut, the sky goddess. When they were birthed, they were entangled in a passionate love embrace. Shu, disapproving of this behavior, decided to separate them by raising Nut high up into the Nun, where she became the sky, arched over the body of Geb, forever separated from each other. Shu became the air that held Nut in the sky. Already pregnant, Nut gave birth to four children: Osiris, the ruler of the dead; Isis, the goddess of sovereignty; Seth, the usurper of the throne and later guardian of the sun god; and Nephthys, the consort of Seth and helper to Isis. The gods continued to procreate until everything in creation had come into being.

These nine gods are referred to as the Ennead ("group of nine"). The first five were the divine elements of the natural order, while the remaining four were the deities of the political order. For the ancient Egyptians, the natural and political orders were indistinguishable from each other.

The Egyptian creation myth of the city of Hermopolis added a group of eight primordial gods known as the Ogdoad ("group of eight"), which existed before the emergence of Atum. The Ogdoad consisted of Nun and Naunet, the primordial waters; Huh and Hauhet, the formlessness; Kuk and Kauket, the darkness; and Amun and Amaunet, the hiddenness. The males were depicted with the heads of frogs, and the females were depicted with the heads of snakes.

Also from the city of Heliopolis, the Egyptian Book of the Dead tells of Apophis, who is seen as the great cosmic serpent and Lord of Chaos, the opponent of light and Ma'at (the concept of truth, balance, order, harmony, law, morality, and justice). He was associated with images of the serpent, evil lizard, and dragon. Each day, Ra (Atum), the sun god, sailed his ship across the arched body of Nut (the sky). At night, Apophis awaited Ra to swallow him into the chaos and darkness. And each night, Ra had to battle and defeat Apophis in order to rise in the morning. Thus, Ra battled chaos every night, never achieving ultimate and complete victory.

Common Themes Among the Myths

Though the names and events are very different from myth to myth, they have several very foundational common themes among them. First is that all the ancient creation myths begin with the primordial chaotic waters, seen as the void. Whether the chaotic waters are portrayed as a god or just an impersonal mass, it is seen as pre-existent to all other things. This shows that the people of ancient world saw chaos as the first and primary force in the universe.

Second is that the first things to come out of the primordial waters were the gods and the cosmic mountain of land. The most important things in creation, therefore, are the gods and the land, which are thus seen as the source of all life. But the fact that they came out of the chaos means people believed that chaos was at the core of the gods and the land. This is how they understood the problem of evil and suffering in creation.

Third is that the main god had to battle the chaotic sea monster before they could create. They had to prove that they had the right to create through their superior physical prowess. Likewise, the gods had to continue to battle the re-emergence of the chaos in order to keep it at bay and from swallowing all of creation. This shows that the people of the ancient world saw the chaos in the world as a constant threat to their existence. They looked to the gods because only the gods could keep chaos at bay—and even then were barely able to do it and at times were swallowed by it as well.

Fourth is that the gods were chaotic and immoral themselves. The gods are basically seen as more powerful and longer-living humans. This shows that the people of the ancient world did not have a concept of something greater or beyond the chaos being embedded into the nature of creation. Therefore, there was no real hope that chaos could be overcome.

The Nature of the Gods

Though as weird and twisted as these stories are, they and others like them tell us much about the nature of the gods and how they operated in relation to creation. The pagan gods were not all powerful. At first glance, Marduk, Ba'al, and Atum/Ra may seem to be great and powerful gods who conquered a formidable enemy, but we can see that this is not true as we look closer at the details. All the pagan myths tell of the beginning and even the end of the gods. They were not seen as a constant in creation that one could depend on. The gods were a part of and bound to the elements of creation. In the Egyptian religion, the sun was literally the body of Ra, when people walked on the earth, they were literally walking on the body of Geb. In the Babylonian religion, the sea was literally the body of Tiamat. And though Marduk of the Babylonian pantheon and Ba'al of the Canaanites may not have been seen as the literal storm, they were most certainly bound up into it. If they created something in creation that was separate from themselves, they created out of preexistent material in the universe—like Marduk's using the dead corpse of his grandmother Tiamat. There is no concept of creating out of nothing. Because of their intrinsic connection to the creation, what happened to creation directly affected them and vice versa.

Therefore, the rule of each of the gods was limited to certain elements in creation. There was a god of the storm, another of the sky, another of crops, another of the sun, and so on. So they were limited in the elements they could control in creation. Not only that, but their control over creation was limited to certain regions. There was a god of the storm in Babylon and a different god of the storm in Canaan, and so on. Marduk as the god of the storm had no jurisdiction over Canaan and therefore could not control the storm there, much like kings over different nations. If

Marduk wanted to control the region of Canaan, he would have to become powerful enough to empower the human kings and armies of his region to attack Canaan and control it. Thus, when the people prayed to the gods, they had to pray to different gods for the different things they wanted protection or blessings for. There was usually one god that a tribe or village honored above others, but in the end, one had to make sacrifices to all the gods to gain blessing and protection.

Even when they ruled over their own region, the gods ruled only with the permission of the other gods. Their rule could be challenged by other gods, and often they were dethroned by another god. They were also lacking in their wisdom and their abilities. In the Babylonian and Canaanite accounts, the high god needed the help of another god in some way. Marduk needed wisdom from Ea in order to defeat Tiamat (the sea). Ba'al likewise not only obtained from Kothar weapons that became crucial in the defeat of Yamm (the sea), but he also needed the help of his sister Anat, who defeated the last of his enemies. He also needed her help to free him from Mot in his second epic battle. In the Egyptian account, Ra could barely stay the attack of Apophis and needed to rest each night to battle again.

The gods came from chaos, and therefore they were chaos themselves. Likewise, they created using chaos as the building blocks of creation. As chaotic gods, they were also amoral. It is not that they knew what was righteous and choose to do otherwise; it was that they had no concept of morality. Violence and sexual immorality were just normal urges that they acted upon with no thought to the morality or consequences of their actions. Murder, theft, rape, bestiality, pedophilia, child sacrifice, and so on were all normal behaviors for them. Because the gods had no concept of morality, they did not instruct humans in how to act nor pass any kind of law code to them. This means many people of the ancient world not only acted in the same way but declared such immoral actions as righteousness since this was how their gods acted. The gods were also extremely arrogant and selfish and had no regard for human life or how they treated others. They also acted like overdramatic, emotional toddlers.

“The myths of the Ugarit [Canaanite], like other mythologies of the Near East, pictured the gods in human forms, having similar aims and aspirations, desires and passions. The amazing aspect about these gods and about Baal himself, is that they appear to have no standard of morality governing their actions. Goodness and godliness did not go hand and hand. They lived immoral lives, hated, warred, killed often for pleasure... They certainly were not models for man to emulate, either ethically or religiously.”²

The gods controlled every aspect of human life through fate. They determined how long someone lived, the quality of life they had, and their success and failures. The gods were not benevolent, and they had no desire to have a relationship with humans. They made no covenants and did not reward righteous conduct or obedience.

The gods did punish and reward the humans, not based on morality but on what the gods selfishly wanted from the humans. Punishment was based on offenses, not morality. If the humans did not obey the gods' selfish desires, did not worship them, or offended them, the gods punished them. And often, the humans did not know what would offend the gods. A god could have a favorite deer in a particular woods, and if a human killed it to feed his family, the god would then punish the human for this offense. Of course, the human could not have known this

² Leah Bronner. *The Stories of Elijah and Elisha as Polemics Against Baal Worship*, p. 45.

was the favorite deer of the gods. In fact, the human may never learn that that was why they were being punished. They would just know that the sudden suffering in their life was at the hands of the gods, and they would make sacrifices until the gods were appeased and end their suffering. The gods then may or may not end the suffering. And there certainly was no guarantee that obedience brought rewards. One's obedience might go completely unnoticed by the gods or be inconsequential to them.

The relationship between the gods and humans was symbiotic. The gods were immortal in the sense they could not die from old age or violence. However, they could die by being forgotten by the people. The gods fed off the sacrifices and devotion of the worship of the people. The gods needed the devotion and the grain, animal, and sometimes human sacrifices of the people in order to survive and be energized. The people then needed the gods to bless them with crops, animals, children, and protection to be able to have the means to feed the gods. Neither the people nor the gods really cared for each other, but they needed each other for survival.

As one comes to the Hebrew creation account of Genesis, a completely different picture is given of Yahweh as the sovereign king and creator of the universe. Though the Bible uses some of the same imagery of the sea as representing chaos, it strips the sea of its mythological nature and godlikeness and reduces it to a mere element of His creation. By doing this, Yahweh communicates to His people with the language of their culture but corrects their theology and presents a more accurate picture of the nature of chaos in relation to Himself as the sovereign king over creation. Chaos was subdued, and then He created.³

Then the Genesis creation account goes beyond the mythologies, declaring that Yahweh has no origin and did not come from the chaos. He was responsible for the entirety of creation and therefore is sovereign over all creation. He created humans in His own image, to have a relationship with Him, and He blessed them and gave them responsibilities over creation because He loved them. The rest of the Bible tells of Yahweh as a loving, covenantal, and relational God who steps into creation in order to redeem humanity. Yahweh is pretty much the complete opposite of the pagan gods.

“The Biblical concept of God is remarkably different. The God of Israel is not subject to nature; He is above it and controls it. He stands alone and there is no being on His level. He does not eat or drink or make love. Neither does He marry nor has He a wife or children. Biblical Hebrew possesses no term for goddess. Another unique feature, strikingly different to the rest of the ancient world, is that God of the Bible prohibits the making of images. When the Bible employs human phrases to describe God, i.e. anthropomorphism, it aims to teach that God has a personal relation to history and to human society. The only image possible of Him is the mental one of a person with whom man can have personal relations.”⁴

“The story of the Hebrew Bible can be described as a struggle to destroy the heathen deities of the ancient world and to replace their worship by the belief in one God. The Bible as a whole can be regarded as a protest against paganism of every description.”⁵

For someone living in the ancient Near East, encountering the God of the Bible would have been revolutionary and refreshing. Consider the fact that Abraham was worshiping the gods of

³ For a much more detail discussion of Genesis 1, see the *Genesis* commentary at www.knowingthebible.net.

⁴ Leah Bronner. *The Stories of Elijah and Elisha as Polemics Against Baal Worship*, p. 136.

⁵ Leah Bronner. *The Stories of Elijah and Elisha as Polemics Against Baal Worship*, p. 1.

Babylon when Yahweh came and spoke to him (Josh. 24:2), offering Abraham a mutual relationship. Yahweh's unique nature and character are why Abraham immediately abandoned his gods and followed Yahweh—and why countless people throughout the Bible did the same.

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