2

Ancient Paganism and the Biblical God

In Chapter 2 I want to consider what lessons might be learnt from the way in which modern scholarship has transformed our understanding of the origins of both Judaism and Christianity. The saddest aspect of this new situation is how little attention is paid at present to the conclusions which could be drawn for a proper understanding of the nature of faith. On the whole, following the narrow historical bias set by the Enlightenment, both scholars of ancient religion and contemporary theologians alike see their role as lying in recording what has happened instead of making any sustained effort to deduce what might be said about the hand of God in such events. Yet in the case of Judaism we are now acutely aware of the high degree to which the forms it later took were influenced by the surrounding culture. In the case of Christianity the key role of an already existing major religion (Judaism) must be noted,[1] though its impact was not as straightforward as was once supposed. But also, when Christianity moved out into the classical world, it likewise took on some forms derived from the pagan religion of the time. In analysing this new understanding,

[1] In Chapter 2, in order to avoid unnecessarily complex explanations, I use terms like Judaism and Israel rather loosely. Strictly speaking, Judaism properly refers only to the post-exilic form of the religion and Israel only to the northern kingdom and not to Judah, its main rival in the south.

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Chapter 2 is divided into two main parts. First, an exploration is offered of the role played by ancient Mesopotamian and Egyptian religion in the shaping of Judaism; second, the contribution made to Christianity through ancient religious philosophy and the mystical religions of paganism is examined. By the end of Chapter 2 I hope to have indicated a number of ways in which it might be appropriate for Christianity to acknowledge elements of dependence on paganism (indirectly through Judaism as well as directly). It is, therefore, necessary to admit the need to learn from others as never before.

The Origins of Judaism in Its Near-Eastern Context

Here I want to explore the debt of Judaism to the wider pagan culture in two stages: first, by examining the present historical consensus; second, more controversially, by exploring the degree to which it might be appropriate to speak of the divine as also active in that wider culture.

Archaeology, Borrowing and Transformation

I shall begin this section by exploring what archaeology can tell us about the history of the region and potential borrowings before examining in more detail some of the myths that were adapted for use in scripture. A huge amount of material has in fact been discovered both inside and outside Israel but with the most significant material usually originating from beyond its borders. The major exception is the discovery of numerous *astarte* which may

well imply a once extensive goddess cult within Israel.[2] There are also quite a number of temple complexes in the country besides that in Jerusalem.[3] Although Israel's geographical position might have led to the conclusion that greater influence would have been exercised by its nearer neighbour Egypt than the more distant successive states in Mesopotamia (the fertile area between the two rivers of the Euphrates and Tigris), this seems not to have been so. This is partly because of the more aggressive policy of these latter states, partly because of an eventually shared language (Akkadian and Aramaean are both Semitic languages. unlike Egyptian or, for that matter, the earlier Sumerian) and partly because climatic conditions were closer. Although weather patterns were quite uncertain in Israel, the same was true in Mesopotamia. While there was no doubt about the land's fertility, the two rivers could be quite unpredictable in the amount of water they produced. By contrast, despite the description of a famous exception in the story of Joseph,[4] the Nile's annual flooding was almost guaranteed and so could be read as a sure sign of the Pharaoh adequately performing the appropriate rituals.

Our knowledge of interaction with Egypt is in any case somewhat limited. Even the famous deposit of official

[2] Sometimes these took the form of obelisks, as can be seen at the temple of Baal in Byblos: cf. 2 Kings. 17.9–10. While the small *astarte* forms of the goddess are usually found in people's homes, these more abstract poles or pillars (known as *asherim*) could possibly (and confusingly) admit to other, unrelated interpretations. *Astarte* is the Greek form of the name of Asherah, the wife of Baal.

[3] Archaeology confirms that the *bamah* or 'high place' did not disappear. Tell Arad is a good example.

[4] Genesis 41.1–45.

correspondence found at Amarna, about 300 kilometres south of Cairo, tells us more about those who sent the letters (from Mesopotamia and Canaan) than their recipient, Pharaoh Akhenaten (c. 1352–1336), or interactions between them. Although some scholars argue that Akhenaten's exaltation of Aten or the sun as sole god should be seen as the source of Hebrew monotheism,[5] this suggestion has been largely rejected, not least because the latter's emergence appears to stem from a very much later date. Commitment to monotheism only becomes clear in Second Isaiah.[6] Even potential parallels between Akhenaten's Hymn to the Sun and Psalm 104 need to be handled with care,[7] both because any such influence could have happened centuries later and because in any case the precise nature of Akhenaten's monotheism remains to a large degree a mystery.[8]

So it is wise to focus instead on the main sites in Mesopotamia, beginning with the famous Sumerian city of Ur, usually identified with Abraham's original home

[5] The German archaeologist Jan Assmann is especially associated with this claim in books such as *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (1998) and *From Akhenaten to Moses: Ancient Egypt and Religious Change* (2016). For consideration of Akhenaten's views in their own right (traced to nostalgia for a simpler past), see James K. Hoffmeier, *Akhenaten and the Origins of Monotheism* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015).

[6] For example, 43.10–11. Moses may have only been committed to one god while not denying the existence of others (a position known as henotheism and common in earlier Hebrew scriptures e.g. Ps. 82.1).

[7] Called 'The Great Hymn to the Orb' in Toby Wilkinson ed., *Writings from Ancient Egypt* (London: Penguin, 2016), 101–6.

[8] For two opposed accounts of his motivation, Cyril Alred, *Akhenaten: King of Egypt* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1988), esp. 237–48 and Nicholas Reeves, *Akhenaten: Egypt's False Prophet* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2005), esp. 133–52.

(Ur of the Chaldees),[9] near the mouth of the two rivers. Although archaeological work on its ziggurat began in 1854, the main excavations were not carried out until under Sir Edward Woolley in 1922–34. His main discovery was large royal tombs in which the kings were buried, not only with some attendants but also numerous pieces of fine artwork and seals. Although Woolley was sometimes too quick in drawing biblical parallels,[10] he was undoubtedly right in seeing Ur as a remarkably advanced civilisation of high calibre. There was even trade with the ancient Harappan culture in the Indus valley, a culture whose very existence had been forgotten until modern times.[11] Nearby was another Sumerian city, Uruk, the subject of extensive German excavation and original home to the hero Gilgamesh (although the only complete version of the story we possess comes from the Neo-Babylonian period). Rightly acknowledged as a world classic, it is a fascinating tale of a contest between nature and nurture that includes an unsuccessful search for immortality, as well as an early version of the story of the flood.[12]

The Babylonians had in fact two periods of significant power: first, when they overcame the Sumerians and introduced Akkadian, a Semitic language, as the *lingua*

[9] Gen. 15.7.

[10] As with the famous Ram in the Thicket which he identified with the story of Abraham and Isaac. More probably, the creature is a goat and the sculpture intended to adorn the foot of a table or chair. The original is now in the Penn Museum in Philadelphia.

[11] Discussed in Chapter 3.

[12] The text is widely available in translation: *Myths from Mesopotamia*, trans. Stephanie Dalley (Oxford World's Classics rev. 2008); *Epic of Gilgamesh*, trans. Andrew R. George (Penguin Classics, 1999).

franca (bridge language) of the people. It was during this time that the famous code of Hammurabi (1792–50) was produced. Second, the later Neo-Babylonian period associated especially with Nebuchadnezzar (602–562 BCE). Although complicated by Saddam Hussein's reconstructions, Babylon is undoubtedly still the most impressive of ancient near-eastern sites. A more tasteful reconstruction of the Ishtar Gate is on offer in Berlin. This was the gate through which the annual procession passed from the Temple of Marduk to the main site of the annual New Year festival or *akitu*.[13] In the interval between these two periods of dominance, power had passed to the Assyrian Empire, with its capital at Nineveh, much further north on the east bank of the Tigris and opposite modern Mosul. The city yielded roughly 24,000 cuneiform tablets from the state archive of Ashurbanipal (668–27). As a reflection of the natural conservatism of religion, it may be noted that at Babylon and Nineveh the Sumerian language continued to be used for religious ritual long after Sumerian power had declined,[14] just as rough woollen vestments were worn by clergy long after they had gone out of fashion.[15]

But perhaps most important of all from a biblical perspective were excavations at the village of Ras Shamra, ten kilometres north of Lattakia on the Syrian

[13] Lasting twelve days, not only did it celebrate the spring barley harvest but also a mythical story of creation and the re-enthronement of the king.

[14] Sumerian seems to have died out as an ordinary spoken language by c.1650 BCE but its religious use continued as late as the first century BCE, with scribes at Babylon still copying out poems in Sumerian.

[15] Evident from artefacts such as stelae.

coast.[16] Here was the ancient city of Ugarit which yielded numerous finds in both Akkadian and in Ugaritic, the local Canaanite language. Its myths reflected the fact that its principal temples were dedicated to Baal and Dagan.[17] Eventually, Jerusalem was to fall to the Babylonians in 587 BCE, with its leading citizens carried off into exile. But not long after, Babylon met a similar fate, yielding place to the Persians who, under Cyrus the Great, proclaimed an edict of toleration for all religions,[18] and so some of the Jews at least were allowed to return. As a result the prophet Second Isaiah even declared Cyrus 'God's anointed'.[19] The experience of exile was probably sufficient in itself to generate his new belief in absolute monotheism: God was experienced as still present with his people, even in exile. The prophet's reflections cannot but have been helped, though, by Cyrus' own religion of Zoroastrianism, and the concern for all indicated in that famous edict.[20]

The wealth of comparative material available has led some to speak of a shared pattern of myth. However, what such generalisations ignore is the way in which similar ideas are sometimes independently generated and at other

[16] Present–day Syria's fourth largest city, situated to the north of Lebanon and south of Turkey.

[17] For some of these myths in an easily accessible form, Michael D. Coogan & Mark S. Smith eds., *Stories from Ancient Canaan* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2nd ed., 2012).

[18] Seen in the so-called Cyrus Cylinder, discovered in the ruins of Babylon in 1879, and now in the British Museum.

[19] Isaiah 42.1. Chapters 40–66 are usually ascribed in whole or in part to this later prophet.

[20] Not without influence even in today's Iran where Zoroastrianism and Christianity continue to enjoy limited freedom of worship.

times significant modifications made, as borrowings are adapted to suit the specific needs and already existing perspectives of different communities.[21] The latter form of influence can be found reflected (though inevitably occurring to differing degrees) within Israelite religion. Take, for instance, the creation story with which the Bible now opens. When read against the backdrop of its Babylonian equivalent *Enuma Elish*, it reads more like a critique than any simple adaptation.[22] Gone are any self-interested motives on the part of the gods for the creation of humans, and in its place comes a world repeatedly declared unqualifiedly good. While the battle with counterforces survives in some of the psalms and in legends of tamed sea-monsters,[23] in the opening verses of Genesis the god who has first to be defeated in the earlier version (Tiamat) is reduced to the vague, impersonal 'deep' (*tehom*). Although the Babylonian version also renders Tiamat powerless, the defeat is commonly rendered as less complete. So, for instance, a seal illustration depicts her as a petulant but now impotent dragon as she lies at Marduk's side more in the manner of a modern pet dog

[21] For an erudite but flawed attempt to reduce the various myths to a few salient themes, see David Leeming, *Jealous Gods, Chosen People: The Mythology of the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). The often very subtle but important differences between common ideas are ignored.

[22] Found in 1849 by the British archaeologist, A. H. Layard, in the ruins of the library of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh, it takes its title from its first two words 'When on high. . .' It is sometimes given the alternative title 'The Seven Tablets of Creation.'

[23] Particularly in relation to the sea monster, Leviathan, for example, Ps. 74.12–14; Is. 27.1; Job 3.8; 41.1–34.

than the great goddess she once was.[24] Nonetheless, the Genesis version effectively went one stage further: she is assumed never to have had such power, which is why she is replaced in the story by a mere thing.

Again, in borrowing the story of the flood from the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, more honourable reasons for divine action are postulated than was true in the original tale. Instead of sin, the gods had taken exception to a very noisy humanity. More of the details, though, are retained in this case compared with the creation myth, including specific birds and the length of the flood.[25] Clearly the biblical authors assume some historical content, and in this they are probably correct (though the flood would have been on a much more limited scale). By contrast, the story of the Tower of Babel looks like pure invention, although its likely inspiration is to be found in the multi-layered Mesopotamian ziggurats stretching up to heaven which modern archaeology has revealed. However, on this occasion there is some reason for thinking the biblical narrative not only historically false but also theologically inaccurate. The building of such ziggurats is presented as a sign of human arrogance in attempting to rival the divine, whereas this was almost certainly not the original

[24] A line dividing the waters is used to indicate that Tiamat has already been carved up. The ninth century BCE cylindrical seal dedication by the Babylonian king, Marduk-zakir-sumi, is illustrated in James B. Prichard ed., *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2nd ed., 2011), 141.

[25] Gen. 6.5–8.22. The main narrative from J assumes a length of forty days but E's continued use of the original seven days can be seen in the treatment of the birds: Gen. 8.6–12.

intention.[26] More likely, it expressed the desire for the gods to come down and give humanity their aid. Certainly, this notion seems to be suggested by the fact that only a small temple was placed at their summit, with a much larger one reserved for the base.[27] Even within Genesis itself an alternative account to Babel is canvassed when the story of Jacob's vision is told. Traditionally referred to as 'Jacob's ladder' and often so translated in our English bibles,[28] the Hebrew actually refers to steps or a stairway. What precisely was meant can be seen if one examines the nature of the surviving structure at Ur. The small temple at the top was actually known as 'the gate of heaven' with the larger one at its base described as 'the house of God'. A partly reconstructed series of steps rises up through the various layers directly to the top.

The story of Moses may equally be seen as a mixture of fact and borrowed fiction. While there is no doubt that Semites were to be found as prisoners in Egypt (recognisable from their different hairstyles and short beards), there is still no evidence to suggest a specific Jewish presence in Egypt at the relevant time. In current thinking, the likelihood seems to be that at most the subsequent invasion of Canaan involved a minority, although this group did eventually succeed in integrating their story and ideas into those of the majority population. Moses' story even begins in a way that has earlier precedent. It was originally told of King Sargon I that he had

[26] Gen. 11.1–9, esp. 4–6.

[27] The occasional use of such architecture for minarets in the Islamic world (as at Samarra) would appear to support this interpretation.

[28] Gen. 28.10–17. Even the NRSV uses 'ladder' in the main text (v.12), though a footnote is added: 'or *stairway* or *ramp*'.

been abandoned in a basket on the Euphrates and rescued from there to become the founder of the dynasty of Akkad.[29] It would seem too much of a coincidence that the same fate had befallen Moses. While some of these historical elements are of no great importance either way, there are other apparent borrowings where the question of the religious significance of what is happening now required some sort of qualification.

To take a small example first, consider the effect the divine presence had on Moses' countenance. Modern translations speak of rays of light emanating from Moses' brow after his encounter with God on Sinai. Yet it turns out that Jerome's Vulgate 'mistranslation' may be right after all (where he speaks of horns). These duly (if puzzlingly) appeared in much subsequent Christian art, including Michelangelo's famous depiction.[30] The reason for now evaluating Jerome's work differently is because archaeology reveals that it was once common for ancient pagan priests to wear a bull's mask with horns before meeting with a divinity in its temple. While that is not

[29] His mother had been a priestess and he was initially raised by a gardener before eventually becoming king (2340–2284 BC). He should not be confused with the later kings of Assyria of the same name. Akkad was the first serious rival to Sumer. For text and commentary, Christopher B. Hays ed., *Hidden Riches: A Sourcebook for the Comparative Study of the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near East* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 113–19. Hays rightly observes that not only are the aims in telling the story rather different, but also that the mythic element does nothing to undermine the historicity of either figure.

[30] Ex.34.33–5. The Hebrew text can be read either way. Michelangelo's image is to be found in the church of San Pietro in Vincoli in Rome. It was originally intended as part of a tomb for Pope Julius II, commissioned in 1505. A greatly simplified version was finished in 1545.

enough evidence in itself to force a change of perspective, the bull does seem to have functioned as a symbol of divine power throughout the Middle East, including in Palestine. Already at Ur the divine is found represented by a bull's head adorned with a golden human beard and, perhaps not surprisingly, identified with the moon god given the curves of its horns.[31] Effectively, the bull was being used as a symbol of the life-giving, fruitful power of the deity. As such the image was also adopted for the Canaanite Baal, as can be seen at Ugarit. The survival of the image can be detected at various places in the Hebrew scriptures, among them in the story of the golden calf.[32] Bulls' horns on altars have also been found within Israel's borders, as at Megiddo. The point of the story would then still be that the glory of God was reflected upon Moses' face. But, instead of being mediated through light, it would now be indicated by those horns that had once characterised so many pagan deities. Even so, a major difference would remain: those horns are now presented as a miraculous gift rather than something intentionally worn.

Given that the Ten Commandments are the best-known section of the Pentateuch, quite naturally much has been made of parallels with the Code of Hammurabi found on a stele at Babylon. Above the cuneiform inscription the king is found represented as receiving these

[31] Originally made from gold and lapis lazuli, now in the Penn Museum, Philadelphia.

[32] For the story of the Golden Calf, Exodus 32. The text of Gen. 49.24 has been corrupted. However, it may contain a reference to 'the Bull of Jacob', which would then constitute a powerful, contemporary metaphor for Yahweh as 'the Mighty One of Jacob'.

instructions symbolically through the gift of a ring and sceptre from the sun god Shamash (here understood as the god who brings illumination). An intriguing detail is the way in which the god's throne is set on a series of very small symbolic hills, presumably, as with Sinai, to indicate divine otherness or exaltation. Such a presupposed form of transmission explains the apodeictic or unconditional character of both pieces of legislation. The emphasis placed in both on the principle of the *lex talionis* or 'an eye for an eye' is often misunderstood. The intention was not vengeful but rather to limit the amount of equivalence or reparation allowed, so that subsequent blood feuds could be avoided: in other words, the avoidance of tit-for-tat where each exchange slightly ups the game. It is also worth noting that the earlier Code is vitiated throughout by class distinctions which is not so with the Law of Moses, apart, that is, from its treatment of slaves.[33] So the Mosaic legislation does represent a real advance, though it is worth adding that concern for the widow and orphan (which is such a marked feature of scripture)[34] is already anticipated as required of a ruler in a number of ancient codes.[35]

[33] For the complete text with scriptural parallels, Prichard, *The Ancient Near East*, 155–79. As one example of the difference, note edicts 197–8 and contrast Lev. 24.22: 'You shall have one law for the alien and for the citizen'.

[34] For example, Ex. 22.22; Deut. 10 18. The theme is also taken up in the New Testament, though qualified in important ways, in I Tim. 5.3–8.

[35] Parallels can be adduced from throughout the ancient Near-East and also from Egypt, long antedating biblical legislation. In the Ugaritic *Tale of Aqhat*, dating from c. 1350, the judge Danel is praised for his concern for the widow and orphan. In another Ugaritic work, *The Legend of King Kirta*, his son Yassib justifies rebellion against him on the grounds that he has failed to protect the poor, widow and orphan.

While it might in principle be possible to argue that, in cases such as those mentioned above, it is only the background frame that is borrowed, such a sharp distinction is hard to maintain, given that elements of imagery, morality and even explicitly religious content pass over from one to the other. Although sometimes exclusively hostile,[36] the more common pattern is one of interaction, with some shared assumptions nonetheless significantly modified in one direction or another. Even *tehom* in Genesis 1 must have developed out of more nuanced borrowings, given references elsewhere in the Hebrew canon to battles with forces hostile to creation. Such, for instance, is the usual explanation given for the huge water basin that stood outside the first temple.[37]

Indeed, the ritual and theology associated with the Jerusalem Temple is surely the most obvious indicator of considerable influence from the surrounding pagan culture. The temple was treated as a locus for divine presence in Israel no less than with temples in the wider pagan world. The same traditions of sacrifice were also adopted, and in both instances performed outside the building. Jewish legislation is extraordinarily detailed and includes holocaust or whole-burnt offerings. The more usual practice in both cases, however, was for 'communion' or shared offerings, in which most of the animal was eaten by priests and people but with the fat (and

[36] As in the interpretation noted above of the ziggurat given in the story of the Tower of Babel. Yet, as also noted earlier, such unqualified hostility was countered by the account of Jacob's Ladder.

[37] Called the 'brazen sea', it was thirty cubits in circumference: I Kings 7.23–6; 2 Chron. 4. 2–5. It appears to have celebrated a divine conquest over the waters which threatened to engulf creation.

sometimes also the bones) reserved for the divine.[38] Although myths were sometimes produced to explain why the gods were not given the best parts of the meat,[39] more interesting is the light the practice throws on how literally or otherwise the materiality of the gods was taken, for in effect they were only offered a good smell, the 'ambrosia' of the classical tradition.

While numerous theories have been put forward to explain the ubiquity of sacrificial practice, the simplest is surely also the most plausible: not that it was in general a form of appeasement (otherwise, why not always the best on offer?) but rather a way of seeking divine sanction for what was seen as in any case a questionable act of destruction. First, there was the appearance of usurping divine rights since, in killing the animal, a life-force was removed which it was universally acknowledged really belonged to the gods. Second, there may also have been a sense of betraying the familiar, an attack on creatures for whom the herders may well have become fond. Admittedly, the ancient practice of human sacrifice (such as at Ur and sometimes also within Israel) needs to be put on the other side. But not only are numbers rather difficult to determine, its outrageous character does need to be weighed alongside the often callous disregard for human life in the modern world. Thus, while there is no modern parallel to the ancient practice of the burial of servants along with

[38] The bones were included in pagan sacrifice, whereas in Israelite practice only the fat was offered. The justification given was that, like blood, fat was life-giving. See Lev. 3.16–17; 7.22–4. Probably, though, this was a later adaption of Jewish attitudes to blood.

[39] Usually with an element of trick involved, as in the classical story of Prometheus.

their masters (as at Ur), despite being wrongly motivated, sacrifice to prevent drought or floods does at one level make better moral sense than the millions sent to their deaths during the twentieth century for the political advancement of their rulers. Again, still contested is the extent of the influence of the Babylonian New Year or *akitu* festival on an annual re-enthronement ceremony within Israel for the king as the god's son. From a modern perspective one of its most interesting aspects of the rite was the way in which, at least within the Babylonian tradition, this involved the annual humiliation of the king, so that he would remember due humility before the gods.[40] There is surely a moral sensitivity there about the proper limits to the power of rulers that the modern world seems to have lost. To be clear, I am not defending human sacrifice in any way, only reminding readers that it would be quite wrong to suggest that the modern world is incontrovertibly better, given the absurdity of some of its ideas or the wickedness of some of its moral practices.

Concluding this brief survey, we may observe that the most important conclusion to draw is that the traditional picture of Judaism arising and developing in a self-contained manner is no longer tenable. There were real debts to the surrounding pagan world. At the same time,

[40] Similar practices seem to have been observed among the Aztecs. This is particularly revealing since it is certain that there could have been no cross-fertilisation of ideas (given the great distance between the two cultures in both time and space). For an attempt at a sympathetic analysis of Aztec religion, see my 'Human Sacrifice and Two Imaginative Worlds. Aztec and Christian: Finding God in Evil' in Julia Meszaros & Johannes Zachhuber eds., *Sacrifice and Modern Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 163–79.

this is not to deny the persistence of some continuing distinctive features.

Recognising an Experiential Dimension

But, in attempting a more sympathetic interpretation of ancient near-east religion, can we go further and speak of such religion as somehow also in contact with God? This is an important issue as the same question applies to other polytheistic systems still practised in today's world, most obviously Hinduism but also Aboriginal and Native American. I want to attempt an answer to this question in two stages; first, by considering whether any defensive strategies for polytheism can be offered by an unqualified monotheist like myself, and, second, by attending to the question of whether any experiential evidence can be found in support of a more sympathetic account.

Perhaps the first thing to note about ancient polytheistic systems is their fluidity in at least three directions. Except for within the shrine itself, in prayer and other such activity, a degree of caution is usually expressed regarding whether the appropriate deity has been identified. This emerges in the initial address where not only are various titles of that particular deity duly noted but a phrase is also usually added extending the address more widely, such as 'or by whatever other name it is lawful to name you'.[41] The second thing is that, over time, the role and extent of the authority of particular gods can

[41] Similar expressions are also found in Greco-Roman religion: for example, Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* 160; Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 11.2; Macrobius, *Saturnalia* 3.9.10–11.

sometimes change. It is almost as though a decision had been taken to retire an older deity as a more appropriate, younger one is allowed to take its place. This is what happened in relations between El and Baal within the Canaanite pantheon. Once more like an executive officer to El as king of gods, eventually Baal became the Canaanite principal deity. El retreated even to the extent of simply becoming a general word for god.[42] Finally, there was a long tradition of cross-cultural comparison under which the gods of one society were matched against those of another, sometimes leading to modifications in one society or the other. The most extreme example of this phenomenon was the Roman pantheon where an almost perfect fit out of something quite different was eventually created by matching Latin deities with the Greek Olympian twelve. Not that the Greeks did not envisage doing much the same. In his *Histories*, the Greek historian Herodotus (484–25 BCE) makes several equations between Egyptian deities and the Greek gods. He even goes as far as to suggest that the Greek names were only invented as late as the poets Homer and Hesiod (wrongly, as it turns out).[43]

[42] As in the Hebrew Bible, or indeed in the Muslim religion where Allah is a term etymologically related to El.

[43] For expression of the general principle: *Histories* 2.50; for identification of Dionysus with the Egyptian Osiris, 2.144 (cf. 1.131). The decipherment of Linear B (the language of Mycenaean culture) by Michael Ventris and John Chadwick in 1952, led to the discovery that the Greek pantheon was very much older than had been previously thought. Even Dionysus was proved not to have been a later, foreign import, as classical Athens had claimed. For the general principle in a Latin writer: Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* II, 15: *nomina alia aliis gentibus* ('different names for different peoples').

That very fluidity means that seeing such gods operating at times as mediators of a single God becomes much easier. It would then turn out to be just one more variant on the already existing adaptability described above: in this case not just moving between two polytheistic deities but between them all and one unique being. Some readers may be horrified by the very suggestion and see in it a rather dangerous endorsement of idolatrous practice. But my proposal is not that such polytheistic beings should once again be worshipped, or that their separate existence be acknowledged. Rather, it is that it is possible to conceive of the single, unique God acting through the forms and symbolism deployed by polytheistic worshippers for a specific, more limited deity. One might compare the way in which, during the patristic period, the Jewish God was provided with elements of characterisation drawn from the Christian Trinitarian reality: for example, in the interpolation of a plural reality operating at the initial creation, or again in some specific member of the Trinity postulated as operating at some specific points in salvation history.[44]

One possible reason for continuing hesitation over such a partial endorsement is the often immoral character of such gods, but to acknowledge *some* mediation is scarcely to commit to the value of any particular cult as a whole. In addition, we need to be clear why such moral complexity existed. It was not just a matter of the gods being created in human likeness. There seems to have

[44] As with the use of the plural in Gen. 1.26 taken to refer to the Trinity, or the Lord God walking in the garden at 3.8 assumed to be the act of God the Son.

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been a real attempt to reflect the totality of human experience. Such a complex metaphysical reality was used to provide some explanation for evil, in the purposes of the various gods understood to be at times in deep conflict with one another. Polytheism may thus be conceived as an alternative way of envisaging the relation between the divine and evil to what prevailed in later monotheistic thought,[45] where evil is seen either as organised by an alternative supernatural but inferior force or else as originating entirely from within the material and human world and thus most commonly as human sin.

Even so, can any experiential evidence be offered for such a mediating role? In a moment I would like to provide some plausible textual examples but first something needs to be said about complexity in symbolic representation. The shunting of such divinities into narrowly defined compartments is a common feature of much modern discussion. What is thereby ignored is the subtlety of polytheism, in its imaginative exploration of a range of options. So, for instance, modern pagans often write in defence of the notion of a Mother or Earth Goddess as though an immanent reality may be neatly contrasted with transcendent monotheism but this is altogether too simple an opposition. So too is the suggestion that male deities are characteristic of hunter gatherers and female of later agricultural settlements. As evidence against the latter division one may note that images of an earth goddess may date from as early as a hundred thousand years ago, that is, long before

[45] Individual gods were thus made more complex rather than setting a wholly good supernatural force against a wholly evil one.

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agriculture. Again, the way in which such beings are commonly portrayed grasping their breasts need not necessarily be interpreted as representing concern for the harvest. Instead, it could be a sign of nurturing care for the family.[46] Equally, despite these roles, it is not uncommon to find some goddesses associated primarily with war, as with Anat, the sister and wife of Baal, or Athene, the principal goddess at Athens.

Similarly, art historians often write as though Christian borrowing of pagan images amounted to no more than a propaganda move, whereas in fact much more subtlety was involved. Admittedly, there is no doubt that Christian artists did borrow from images of Isis with her child Horus to portray the Christian Virgin and Child, just as Zeus provided a model for God the Father and Dionysus for the adult Jesus. But the Church Fathers detected something rather more than just an opportunity for propaganda from merely accidental parallels. For some at least certain features of Christianity had been anticipated by paganism.[47] So, although Christian theologians preferred to stress formal parallels, there seems little doubt that Egyptian worshippers did sometimes actually feel the care of Isis for them through such imagery. As one commentator observes, 'a person with a headache became Horus the Child, cared for by his mother, who herself became Isis'.[48] Again, rather than just describing as quaint

[46] Which would explain their presence primarily in the home.

[47] In a strategy known as *praeparatio evangelica*.

[48] Gary J. Shaw, *The Egyptian Myths* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2014), 9. Shaw observes a similar practice in death, as he continues: 'in death, the deceased transformed into various gods whilst transversing the after realm'.

the use of animal imagery in representations of Egyptian gods, we need to take some account of their likely underlying rationale. Animals which had once been seen as exclusively threatening and a source of anxiety now became images for the divine, partly because the otherness of divinity could be stressed in this way but partly also (and perhaps no less importantly) because it seemed to make their this-world equivalents more amenable to human concerns.[49] At Karnak, for example, one can find Amun represented as a mixture of ram and lion, while a contemporary hymn speaks of him as a snake and goose. Meanwhile Sobek was given the form of a crocodile. Although most pervasive in Egypt, the phenomenon was in fact common throughout the Middle East. Baal's identification with the bull has already been mentioned.

Of all ancient religions, ancient Egyptian can often appear the most bewildering. Sometimes such perplexity is not at all helped by specialists, where accuracy of detail is allowed to take precedence over overall coherence.[50] It is, therefore, a great relief to discover a different attitude emerging in some more recent writing. A good example is the work of Emily Teeter. Basing her argument on a wealth of supporting evidence, she detects a lively and active religion under which 'the gods were always there for the petitioners, and they were a constant comfort to their flock'.[51] The vast labour expended on

[49] In Egypt such creatures included the lion, snake, crocodile, bull, ram, jackal and falcon.

[50] As in attempts to differentiate between different versions belonging to different cities, for example Memphis or Heliopolis.

[51] Emily Teeter, *Religion and Ritual in Ancient Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 76.

building the pyramids or the exclusion of ordinary folk from the everyday rituals of the temples should, therefore, not blind us to the way in which the common people nonetheless fully participated in shared myths and their implications. During their lives other ways of accessing the divinities were on offer.[52] In death not only were cheaper methods of mummification available for accessing the very literal Egyptian understanding of survival but also the same standards of judgement were applied to rich and poor alike.[53] Indeed, one reason why Akhenaten's introduction of monotheism never caught on and polytheism was quickly restored under his son Tutankhamun was because it produced too impersonal a religion. Every aspect was now mediated through the actions of the Pharaoh but not directly available to other worshippers.[54]

At this distance in time it is not possible to identify definitively where, if at all, God might be said to have been experienced, or in some sense legitimately be taken to have addressed members of some particular society. All we can say is that it does look as though this is sometimes a realistic possibility, whether we take the implicit acknowledgement made by the Hebrew scriptures in their occasional borrowing,[55] or the discovery made by modern

[52] Special side-chapels for ordinary folk were provided. The god could also be accessed during processions and even dedicatory tablets created in the open air. For types of response given by the god, 107–9; for stelae with hearing ears on them, 84.

[53] Drawing images of food or even reciting a list was deemed an acceptable substitute: Teeter, 130–1. Worshippers were even allowed to submit a corn mummy of Osiris.

[54] Teeter, *Religion and Ritual*, 182–96, esp. 184–87.

[55] The closest parallel is between *The Instruction of Amen-em-Opet* and Proverbs 22.17–24.22. For the text of the former, James B. Pritchard

believers of sentiments that seem very effectively to echo their own. Take, for instance, the following hymn in praise of Amun which might well have been written today: For humanity 'He created plants and cattle, fowl and fish to sustain them. . . For their sake he creates the daylight. . . and when they weep, he hearkens. . . It is He who watches over them by night and by day'. Indeed, his care even extends to the smallest of creatures. 'It is he who makes it possible for the mosquitoes to live together with the worms and fleas, who takes care of the mice in their holes, and keeps alive the beetles (?) in every tree'.[56] At the same time as making such comparisons we need to be on our guard against those who want to use them to indulge in reductionist strategies. So, for instance, despite repeated claims to the contrary, the resurrection of Christ cannot be subsumed as part of a more general Osiris myth. Apart from little signs of interest in the myth in the Palestine of Jesus' own day, Osiris was helped to return only for a day,[57] thereafter being left behind to rule the underworld.[58] A more important objective is surely to attempt to penetrate behind the ancient Egyptians' very different mythological way of thinking. A straining towards some deeper reality can perhaps thereby be detected.

ed., *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), 346–52.

[56] From *The Teaching for King Merikare* (Pharaoh who died in 2040 BCE); quoted in Shaw, *The Egyptian Myths*, 36.

[57] With the object of impregnating his sister Isis, and thus fathering Horus.

[58] Strictly speaking, not an underworld since it was situated at the other end of the sun's course.

Taking the rest of the Middle East more widely, I think that a similar point can be made. In their desire to present themselves as purely objective historians, biblical scholars have been reluctant to draw any conclusion about the status of Mesopotamian experience of the divine. A rare exception is the Assyriologist, H. W. F. Saggs.[59] He did not hesitate to conclude a very careful analysis with the observation that 'Mesopotamian religion may also . . . have been one vehicle by which came knowledge of a finite part of the infinity of the divine'.[60] At the same time, he identified various distinctive contributions from Israel.[61] That of course needs to be recognised but so too do comparable movements elsewhere. Although intense devotion to divinity does not guarantee that divinity's existence, there is no shortage of examples of individuals entering into such deep commitments. The staring eyes of the priest with bull's horns whom we mentioned earlier does suggest (at least to me) intense, longing devotion. Again, just as there are Egyptian cases of people giving up everything in pursuit of one god,[62] so Babylonia offers us an extraordinary example in the case of King Nabonidus (556–39 BCE). He seems to have had a special devotion to the moon god, Sin. For his sake he left Babylonia for ten years in order to perform the god's

[59] In his obituary (*Independent* 26 Dec 2005) Saggs (1920–2005) was described as 'one of the outstanding Assyriologists of his generation'.

[60] H. W. F. Saggs, *The Encounter with the Divine in Mesopotamia and Israel* (London: Athlone Press, 1978), 188. For another scholar supporting him on the basis of Babylonian penitential hymns, 172.

[61] Mainly in terms of an eventually stronger transcendence and universality, though he notes that, ironically, the former put Israel at a further distance from Christianity:187–8.

[62] Simut in relation to the goddess Mut: Teeter, 102.

rites more effectively at places such as Harran and Ur, and even in Arabia.

Mention has already been made of influences upon the early traditions of Israel and on the way in which the story of Moses is told. This could be augmented by parallels in the way prophecy was practised and in the reflections of wisdom literature.[63] But one new factor that more recent scholarship has introduced is the possibility that the very idea of Yahweh was itself initially borrowed from local pagan tradition, and thereafter developed from this base. What is suggested is that Moses' notion of Yahweh probably originated in an encounter with a polytheist deity who was a storm god, with this happening perhaps somewhere to the south of Edom.[64] As such, it indicates a marked change in perspective from half a century or so ago when it looked as though archaeology was offering progressive confirmation of the early history of Israel almost as the Bible records it.[65] There is now much more doubt given the lack of any decisive evidence of the nation's sojourn in Egypt. A much more likely scenario, it is suggested, is that at most a minority was involved and

[63] Saggs, *Encounter with the Divine*, for prophetic parallels, 384–402; for wisdom literature, 343–83.

[64] Thomas Römer, *The Invention of God* (Cambridge: Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2015). 24–85. The title of the book is unfortunate but Römer merely intends 'a progressive construction arising out of a particular tradition' (4). For an Conservative Jew willing to contemplate similar possibilities, see Benjamin D. Somner, *Revelation and Authority: Sinai in Jewish Scripture and Tradition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015).

[65] As, for example, in John Bright's classic work, *History of Israel*, first published in 1959 and currently in its fourth edition (2000).

that it is this group that eventually persuaded the people as a whole to accept Yahweh as their god.

For quite a number of generations some degree of interchangeability with El, Baal and some foreign gods such as Chemosh probably existed.[66] What made the difference was the defeat of Judah and the exiling of its leading citizens. While imperial expansion led other nations to a position more like henotheism,[67] the Jewish response was to see Yahweh as Lord whatever the situation, and so as Lord over all space and time. This is the position one finds reflected in the writings of Second Isaiah. Unfortunately, in the process he speaks contemptuously of typical near-east patterns of ritual behaviour.[68] Not only is his account unfair but the form of argument he deploys could have been applied equally well in reverse 'without any distortion'. After all, Yahweh had been traditionally presupposed to live 'inside, or at the least in close association with, a decorated chest made of acacia wood'.[69] Yet, as noted earlier, it is not impossible that the prophet's depiction of Cyrus as 'anointed' for his role by God represents some sort of implicit acknowledgement of influence from Persian Zoroastrianism, the

[66] The case is argued at length in Mark S. Smith, *God in Translation: Deities in Cross Cultural Discourse in the Biblical World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 91–130. Chapter 1 had already established the pattern for the Middle East more generally (37–90).

[67] As an empire expanded, only its god was seen to count, as with Marduk and Babylonia. Usually called 'henotheism' after a term coined by Max Müller, Smith proposes substituting 'summotheism' since subordinate deities were not wholly discounted: 163–69.

[68] For example, Isaiah 44.9–20. Not entirely fair since the ancient view was only that the deity assumed temporary habitation of the image, not that it was ever wholly confined within it.

[69] Saggs, *The Encounter with the Divine*,15.

nearest thing to monotheism that the Middle East had hitherto seen.[70] So even here, as monotheism at last emerges, one might speak of debt as well as hostility and critique, and so of a more complicated dynamic. In all events, it is a pattern that continues with such indirect mediation or 'translatability' still acknowledged centuries later at Alexandria.[71] In short, I would seem by no means alone in recognising such divine action more widely. Even so, these exceptions are few and far between.[72] So it cannot be denied that I am advocating the necessity for a fundamentally different approach in the light of what we now know both about the history of Judaism and that of the surrounding cultures. That stressed, I want to now turn to the second part of this chapter and consider the impact on Christianity of paganism in the classical world.

Mystery Religions and Classical Philosophy in Relation to Christianity

In considering the origins of Christianity it was once fashionable to identify non-Jewish factors such as Gnosticism.[73] Although for most scholars it is now seen as sufficient to appeal to the internal complexity of Judaism, such conclusions apply only to its original biblical context. There is still

[70] Apart, that is, from the exceptional case of Akhenaten in Egypt. If so, Israeli's God could then be seen as acting through Ahura mazda, the Zoroastrian deity.

[71] For a couple of examples, see *The Letter of Aristeas* (16) and Aristobolus, Smith, 300–6.

[72] Less to do with the implausibility or otherwise of the claim and more about the reluctance of scholars of the Bible and ancient world to penetrate beyond conventional historical questions.

[73] As in Rudolph Bultmann's interpretation of John's Gospel.

the question of what happened once Christianity moved out into the wider classical world, where it did indeed undergo various transformations. Two of these will now be considered in some detail. First, and of lesser significance, there is the influence of mystery cults. Second, there is the impact of pagan philosophy. In both cases, recent scholarship has delivered some important insights.

The Impact of Greek Religion and Mystery Cults

Before exploring the impact of mystery cults on the shaping of Christian mission and practice, it will be useful first to place classical paganism in the wider context of its own distinctive history, which runs parallel with what has already been discussed in respect to the Middle East. Classical deities and the various roles assigned to them are for the most part better known. However, their remarkable effectiveness at maintaining prominence in subsequent centuries and even today, despite the more general marked decline in classical learning,[74] has its undoubted disadvantages: the widespread assumption that only purely human values are represented. To some degree this has been reflected in the history of scholarly study across the twentieth century. At the century's beginning Greek religion was located at the margins of culture, in the fertility rites detected by the so-called Cambridge Ritualists.[75] From the 1960s onwards,

[74] While knowledge of the original literature has declined, its place has been maintained through more modern media such as film or comic.

[75] Most obviously in the work of Jane Ellen Harrison but also in that of Cornford and Murray: J. E. Harrison, *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (1903); F. M. Cornford, *The Origin of Attic Comedy* (1914);

however, change was evident in recognition of the key role played by religion in the functioning of the Greek city.[76] But it was only really from the 1990s onwards that this perspective too was acknowledged to be inadequate and religion seen to ground every aspect of life.[77] Even the move from the earlier semi-abstract *xoana* to more human representations of the gods does not necessarily represent retreat from a more religious perspective. They could simply constitute different ways of acknowledging divine difference, the former through utilising abstraction, the latter through an impossible beauty or perfection of form.[78] As one major survey of ancient Athens observes, 'myth and religion are pervasive, inescapable, all-shaping . . . Religion was so close to the Athenians that it was easy to live with, like a comfortable old coat'.[79] The challenge to analyse this pervasiveness has resulted in a veritable explosion of writing on the subject.

While it is true that Roman religion continues to receive less attention, it does also raise some distinctive

G. Murray, *Four Stages of Greek Religion* (1912), increased to *Five* in 1925.

[76] Well represented by Walter Burkert, *Greek Religion* (1985) but for an early anticipation V. Ehrenberg, *The Greek State* (1960).

[77] For two helpful general surveys: Emily Kearns, *Ancient Greek Religion: A Sourcebook* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010); Esther Eidinow & Julia Kindt eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Ancient Greek Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[78] The use of *xoana* continued into the later period. The surpassing beauty of Praxiteles' statue of Aphrodite at Cnidus might be read, as it was at the time, as indicating unattainable perfection: Julia Kindt, *Rethinking Greek Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012),155–89. For a discussion of *xoana*, A. A. Donohue, *Xoana and the Origins of Greek Sculpture* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1988).

[79] Robert Parker, *Polytheism and Society at Athens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 452, 453.

issues of its own; for example, decline in the use of auguries, major reform movements such as those of Augustus, the impact of foreign cults and the role of emperor worship.[80] It is often observed how fortunate Christianity was to be promulgated at the time it was, with a large part of the world at peace under an empire which enjoyed easy communication and travel. It is also possible to point to other deeper features, among which may be observed a deep longing among many for a more personal kind of religion, something which one finds reflected in both a new prominence for mystery cults and a new type of philosophy which bears close analogues with religion. It is the mystery cults which must first engage our attention.

Mystery cults have a long history in the religious phenomena of the classical world. From the fifth century BCE, Euripides *Bacchae* offers an extraordinarily powerful tragic drama of the results of King Pentheus' attempts to spy upon the secret Dionysian countryside rituals of his mother and other followers. Best known, however, in the ancient world were undoubtedly the annual Eleusinian rites in honour of Demeter and her daughter Persephone that took place about twenty kilometres from Athens and to which all Greek speakers were invited.[81] That inclusive aspect, as well as the lively processions from Athens, undoubtedly implies a very corporate activity. Yet it should also be noted that, although many

[80] For a helpful general survey, J. H. W. G. Leibeschuetz, *Continuity and Change in Roman Religion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979).

[81] Even slaves could be initiated. A degree of revolt against hierarchy was encouraged and Lycurgus even attempted to legislate that all alike should go on foot (Parker, *Polytheism and Society*, 349–50).

aspects of the liturgy were indeed social, the culminating experience appears to have been much more personal: probably some heightened awareness of the possibility of surviving death. Given the number and range of initiates, it is astonishing that no precise information about the key ritual moments survives.[82] Perhaps even doubters retained respect for what they had experienced. Plutarch has been taken to imply that various forms of disorientation were created before an individual was then provided with some more positive vision. One modern commentator describes this in terms of the initiate having 'met the goddess and experienced her grace and power at first hand'.[83] Another more cautiously proposes that 'it worked by making familiar myth more vivid and immediate to the worshippers than did any other Greek cult'.[84] Certainly, in the third main ancient form of mystery cult, Orphic rites, even less is known, despite a profusion of reference to individual initiation in gold tablets discovered at various burial sites.[85]

What changes with the post–Alexandrian Hellenistic world is not then the first appearance of mystic cults as such but rather their greater number and popularity.

[82] Some have suggested something as simple as the vision of a new blade of corn, others some form of dramatic performance.

[83] Hugh Bowden, *Mystery Cults in the Ancient World* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2010), 48. The details are deduced by Burkert from Plutarch, fr. 168, although Plutarch, like Pausanias, does not offer a direct description anywhere.

[84] Parker, *Polytheism and Society*, 360.

[85] There is a not altogether complimentary reference in Plato's *Republic* (364 BCE). Most of the texts come from Italy and are in hexameter verse, offering advice on the journey through death. For further discussion, Bowden, *Mystery Cults*, 137–55.

Although Rome initially tried to impose some form of control on new introductions from the east,[86] eventually they were to prove as strong in the capital as elsewhere, with Cybele or the Great Mother and Mithras among the best known.[87] In attempting to explain their new prominence, some point to a world that felt itself more under the absolute control of fate and so desirous of release. But I doubt whether there is a need to look any further than the change in the political scene, with major decisions now removed and far from local control.[88] While emperor worship was popular,[89] at the same time its prevalence did underline how distant the forces determining the individual's life often were.

[86] In 186 BCE the Senate banned the Bacchanalia (the Roman name for the Dionysian mysteries), and the historian Livy also attacked them in the following century.

[87] The Magna Mater was welcomed because, according to a Sibylline oracle of 205 BCE, her arrival would help in the defeat of the Carthaginians. Attitudes became more complicated when she came to be associated with a consort Attis and the rituals now included castration of her priests. For further details, Mary Beard, John North & Simon Price eds., *Religions of Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), II, 43–49. Mithras did not arrive until the first century AD and eventually became especially popular among the military. At the beginning of the twentieth century the French scholar, Franz Cumont, proposed a Persian origin and strong parallels with Christianity but both notions are now widely challenged.

[88] In his book *Hellenistic Religions: An Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), Luther H. Martin makes central to his analysis a distant Ptolemaic structure to the universe, coupled with the attempt, by way of compensation, to revive ancient female chthonic deities: 6–10.

[89] The cult expressed gratitude for a more peaceful and safer world. So it is not surprising that the initiative for new temples in honour of Rome or one of its emperors frequently came from the locality itself rather than as an imperial imposition from outside.

It would be quite wrong to think of earlier Greek religion as devoid of personal piety. Exceptions to the more common formulaic prayers were by no means unknown. Examples would include some of the so-called Homeric Hymns.[90] Likewise, it is not just to philosophers such as Xenophanes (d. 475 BCE) or Plato (427–347 BCE) that one must appeal to find critiques of myth. Moral reservations are also used to justify modification of myth in some of the poetry of Pindar (d. 438 BCE).[91] Yet Pindar and the Homeric Hymns cannot be entirely separated from their social context,[92] whereas by the time of the Hellenistic age more unqualifiedly personal forms of address were undoubtedly becoming quite common. A famous example is the *Hymn to Zeus* from the Stoic philosopher Cleanthes (331–232 BCE).[93] A recent phenomenon is the way in which contemporary scholars of Roman religion also now more readily admit the existence

[90] *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter* ends on a more personal note (lines 471–95) which may well imply that the author had been inducted into the mystery. One modern editor of the text does not hesitate to draw parallels with Christianity, not only in the poem's reference to wheat but also in the way in which a more intimate relation to the divine is substituted for earlier approaches: Helene P. Foley ed., *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 150–51.

[91] The subtlety of Pindar can be seen in his various modifications: for example, in *Olympians* 1 and 9.29–39.

[92] As in the Hymns' association with cultic centres, and Pindar's writing connecting with the great athletic festivals.

[93] Available in Mark Kiley ed. *Prayer from Alexander to Constantine: A Critical Anthology* (London: Routledge, 1997), 133–38. The whole section on pagan prayer is invaluable, not least in highlighting some of its complexities: 121–204, esp. 123–27. The original, together with a translation, is also available in Constantine A. Trypanis ed., *The Penguin Book of Greek Verse* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), 283–85.

of similar personal expressions across the same period.[94] But perhaps most pertinent here is a work which takes us back to the Greek world, the novel of Apuleius (c. 124–170 CE) commonly known as *The Golden Ass*. Superficially an engaging story of metamorphosis, it is also intended to recommend the mystery cult of Isis, in which the author was himself inducted. The author's own experience is reflected in the account of the hero's final initiation. The goddess speaks to him in a dream:

"Here I am, Lucius, roused by your prayers. I am the mother of the world of nature, mistress of all the elements, first-born in this realm of time. I am the loftiest of deities, queen of departed spirits, foremost of heavenly dwellers, the single embodiment of all gods and goddesses. I order with my nod the luminous heights of heaven, the healthy sea breezes, the sad silences of the infernal dwellers. The whole world worships this single godhead under a variety of shapes and liturgies and titles... I am here out of pity for your misfortunes. I am here to lend you kindly support. End now your weeping, abandon your lamentation, set aside your grief, for through my providence your day of salvation is now dawning ..." When she had reached the close of her sacred prophecy, that invincible deity retired to keep her own company. Without delay I was at once released from sleep. With mingled emotions of fear and joy I arose, bathed in sweat, utterly bemused by so vivid an epiphany of the powerful goddess... At that moment the clouds of dark night were dispersed, and a golden sun arose. My personal

[94] Jörg Rüpke opens his work *Religion of the Romans* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007) by considering how an ode of Horace might reflect genuine religious expression (1.30). A few pages later he draws attention to the way in which in the late third century BCE Scipio Africanus was alleged to have spent all night praying to Jupiter in his Temple: 3–5, 13–14.

sense of well-being seemed to be compounded by a general atmosphere of joy... For a sunny, windless day had suddenly succeeded the previous day's frost, so that even the birds were enticed by the spring warmth to burst tunefully into sweet harmonies, as with their charming address they soothed the mother of the stars, the parent of the seasons, the mistress of the entire world.[95]

It has been suggested that such rituals resembled some forms of modern charismatic worship.[96] While perhaps true in some cases, a more interesting question here is whether it is possible to detect early Christianity adapting some patterns of approach from the mystery cults in order to make its own mission more effective in the wider classical world. I would suggest that this was indeed so. While in the New Testament the baptism offered in Jesus' name and the teaching associated with it were treated as offered openly to all, notable is the degree to which in subsequent patristic literature baptism is presented as initiation into something which cannot otherwise be fully known and experienced. So, not only was a long period of preparation required but also casual unbaptised observers were forbidden access to observe the eucharist.[97] Little wonder, then, that Pliny the Younger, as governor of Bithynia, found himself investigating claims of strange, secretive practices among the

[95] Apuleius, *The Golden Ass*, XI. 5-7. trans & ed. P. G. Walsh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). 220-2.

[96] Bowden, *Mystery Cults*, 212–21.

[97] For a general history, Everett Ferguson, *Baptism in the Early Church: History, Theology and Liturgy in the First Five Centuries* (2009); for the kind of language used in the fourth century, Edward Yarnold, *The Awe-Inspiring Rites of Initiation* (1994).

Christians.[98] That being so, it requires little stretch of the imagination to see Gnosticism as a challenge to Christianity precisely because it too was engaging in a similar, though as it turned out, less successful exercise. Although not strictly a mystery religion, it did offer a secret way but mostly through knowledge rather than experience.[99] Christianity combined the two more effectively. Even so, it was often as a substitute for some earlier mystery cult that it was first recognised. This is particularly true of the large number of sites in which we find a church built on top of what had originally been a mithraeum, most notably in the famous church of San Clemente in Rome. Built c. 200 CE, the mithraeum was eventually blocked up when a church was built over it in the fifth century, which in its turn became a crypt for the present twelfth century church. All three edifices can now be viewed.

Of course, this is only one relatively small aspect of Christian practice. I have allowed my examination here to extend more widely to changing estimates of the impact of classical paganism, precisely because newer approaches better explain why Christian conversions moved relatively slowly in the ancient world. Missionaries can now be seen to have encountered real religious belief and experience in the pagan world. So it was only as greater stress was placed on mystical experience that it too could be seen as a real competitor. However, even more important and certainly far deeper in its influence was classical philosophy.

[98] But he found no evidence: *Epistle* 10.96.

[99] Some writers on Gnosticism do find some strong parallels, for example Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1983), 214–20; 285–94.

Philosophy as Religious; Theurgy as Sacramental

In reaching out to the wider classical world, Christianity also faced one obvious difficulty: its lack of philosophical sophistication. So, it is scarcely surprising that its advocates needed to engage seriously with pagan philosophy in order to determine how the imaginative language of scripture might be translated into more abstract intellectual categories. Fortunately, the dominant thinking of the time in Stoicism and in Middle- and later Neo-Platonism was fundamentally sympathetic to religious belief.[100] The founder of Neo-Platonism, Plotinus (204–70 CE) in particular combined suggestions he found in a number of Plato's dialogues (especially the *Republic*, *Parmenides* and *Timaeus*) into the notion of divinity flowing hierarchically through three graded aspects of the One, Mind and World Soul that offered some obvious parallels to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity: with the Father as One or Source, the Son as Mind and the Holy Spirit as the immanent World Soul. Not that the relationship was an entirely straightforward one. Most Christian writers were loath to acknowledge their debt. Instead, they commonly spoke of the material they borrowed as itself having been borrowed earlier by pagans from

[100] Stoicism began in the early third century BCE with Zeno. It is best known for its stress on morality and its immanent notion of the divine Logos. In the period known as Middle Platonism (dating from the first century BCE to the third CE), followers of Plato were often happy to combine ideas from Plato and from Stoicism. Representatives include Antiochus of Ascalon, Philo, Plutarch and Numenius of Apamea. Although Plotinus was the originator of Neo-Platonism, other figures are relevant to the discussion which follows, among them Porphyry, Iamblichus and Proclus.

Judaism; similarly, with apparent parallels in pagan myth.[101] The *Praeparatio Evangelica* of Eusebius of Caesarea (d. 339 CE) is an obvious case in point.[102]

Nonetheless, the debt did indeed run deep. While there was reluctance to introduce a non-biblical philosophical term at the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE as a way of resolving internal disagreements,[103] in the second century the Apostolic Fathers had already developed their apologia for faith in part by deploying philosophical ideas.[104] In the third the two great teachers at Alexandria, Clement and Origen, were so deeply imbued with the ideas of pagan philosophy that they are commonly referred to as the so-called 'Christian Platonists of Alexandria'.[105] Nor was the pattern to change later. Ambrose used Cicero and Stoicism to develop his account

[101] The difference can be seen in attitudes to the Virgin Birth. Whereas a modern defender might stress difference from pagan myth, a patristic writer is more likely to see such myth as anticipatory, intended to undergird the doctrine's plausibility.

[102] For claims of Greek theft, see, for example, X.13.14–15.52. Over 70 per cent of the work consisted of quotations from pagan writers. While this may look like an attempt at fairness, where it is possible to check, bias is noticeable: for example, in select quotation used to imply that Porphyry approved of animal sacrifice.

[103] In the term *homoousios*, 'of the same substance as'.

[104] In Justin Martyr, Plato is assumed to have learnt from Moses, including in his mention in the *Timaeus* of a cross-like structure to support the creation: Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, 59.

[105] Compare Charles Bigg, *The Christian Platonists of Alexandria* (Bampton Lectures for 1886). The traditional account of Origen's Platonism has been challenged by Mark Edwards in *Origen Against Plato* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002). Edwards sees him as essentially a biblical theologian, but Maurice Wiles remained unconvinced: *Journal of Theological Studies* 55 (2004), 340–43.

of Christian ethics,[106] while a little later comes a Platonist approach to the doctrine of the Trinity from Augustine.[107] Although some like Tertullian challenged the close linkage,[108] the final result can be seen in the theology of Aquinas where the Bible is read through a distinctly philosophical lens that has no difficulty in detecting major elements of classical metaphysics within scripture itself. To give but two examples, there is his reinterpretation of God's revelation at the Burning Bush as the equation of divine essence and existence,[109] while immutability is found in a prophetic assertion of divine constancy.[110] However, both passages had originally meant no such thing.

From such results it is sometimes argued that the later church betrayed its roots, as in the German church historian, Adolph von Harnack's famous contrast between the simple truths of the original gospel and its dogmatic elaboration under the influence of Greek philosophy.[111] Although this is not the place to argue the issue, it would seem to me one of Christianity's great strengths that it faced the challenge of ancient philosophy and was thus enabled to deepen its vision. What can be done here,

[106] Ambrose even gives his work the same title as Cicero's original, *De officiis*.

[107] In the fifteen books of *De Trinitate* c. 417 CE.

[108] As in his famous question, 'What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?' *Prescriptions against Heretics*, 7. For a very different view, Augustine, *Confessions* 7.9.

[109] Ex. 3.14: God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM'. Nowadays usually interpreted as an assertion of consistency or of freedom ('I will be who I will be').

[110] Malachi 3.6: 'I the Lord do not change'.

[111] In his *Dogmengeschichte* (*History of Dogma*) of 1894.

though, is note how what was imported was in fact less alien than has been traditionally depicted. Two recent changes in scholarly understanding have quite transformed the pagan philosophy of the time into a much more sympathetic reality. There was, therefore, good reason why Christian theologians found the move so attractive. The first concerns what was meant by philosophy in the ancient world. It is now contended that it was of its very nature religious. The second is the challenge to the long-standing claim that such philosophy eventually degenerated into magic and irrationality.

The first change of perspective is largely the work of one man, the gifted French academic Pierre Hadot (1922–2010). Basically, his claim is that ancient philosophy should not be understood against the backdrop of modern. Partly because of the role it was assigned in the middle ages as conceptual handmaid to theology and partly because of the modern academy's love in any case of the conceptual model, philosophy is now conducted quite differently.[112] But for Socrates the aim was 'to form people and to transform souls' and that is why dialogue formed such an integral part in his understanding of its role.[113] It then became a pattern to be followed by subsequent thought, as can be seen in the primary aims of the Stoics.[114] A careful study of physics, for example, was included in their proposed curriculum, not primarily

[112] Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 31–32.

[113] Pierre Hadot, 'Preface' in *L'Enseignement oral de Platon* (Paris: Cerf, 2006), 11.

[114] Hadot, *Philosophy as Way of Life*, 265: Peace of mind, inner freedom and a cosmic consciousness.

because of any conceptual issues raised but because such knowledge could contribute towards generating a more universal point of view which they saw as so essential to the good life.[115] Such a pattern of practice was then continued into the Christian era in later forms of Platonism and Stoicism. The result was that their concerns came quite close to those of Christianity.[116]

These general aims also brought with them some further parallel developments. Among them was a form of writing which can easily be misread from a modern perspective, and that is writing which sounds like psychological biography but is really intended to elicit a spiritual response. One example Hadot pursues at length is the *Meditations* of the Stoic emperor Marcus Aurelius. Read by many modern commentators as the work of a depressive with considerable disdain for the world, Hadot argues that the emperor's negative comments should be read only in relation to his more positive comments: as a way of making the workings of providence sound all the more impressive.[117] Likewise, during his inaugural lecture at the College de France Hadot used the research of Pierre Courcelle to suggest that even Augustine's famous conversion story was not intended primarily as a piece of autobiography at all but rather as a means of encouraging readers to reflect on where they themselves stood. Thus,

[115] Ibid., 94.

[116] Seen, for example, in later philosophy's concern with providence: George Boys-Stones, 'Providence and Religion in Middle Platonism' in Esther Eidinow, Julia Kindt & Robin Osborne, (eds.) *Theologies of Ancient Greek Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 317–38.

[117] Ibid., 179–205. He was Emperor 161–80 CE.

the fig tree represented the 'mortal shadow of sin' and the child's voice God's call potentially to any of us, including, of course, Augustine himself.[118] Again, both Christian and pagan philosopher alike were concerned enough to respond to authoritative texts by giving them, if necessary, new and pertinent meanings. Hence the reason why Neo-Platonism could feel itself justified in giving very different interpretations of Plato from what modern scholars might suggest; so too why Augustine does not hesitate to impose a metaphysical meaning on one of the psalms where a more innocent interpretation would once have held sway.[119] In short, both pagan and Christian were engaged in similar strategies in their search for underlying truth, and that is why so much of the philosophy of the time could enter into Christianity's conception of itself, even if not always self-consciously.

The second major change seeks to reverse the conclusions of a famous book by E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (1951), in which his argument culminates in suggesting that even that most rational and admired aspect of Greek thought, the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle, ended up in the late Empire being reduced to the justification of superstition and magic. *De Mysteriis*, a work by one of the later Neo-Platonists, Iamblichus (245–325 CE), is described as 'a manifesto of irrationalism, an assertion that the road to salvation is found not in reason but in ritual'.[120] Dodds' general verdict on the

[118] Ibid., 49–70, esp. 51–52.

[119] The Latin 'in idipsum' in Psalm 4.9 ('at that very moment') becomes 'the self-same God': *Philosophy*, 3; cf. *Confessions* 9.4.11

[120] E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951), 286–87.

practice known as theurgy, his negative judgement was very widely endorsed by an earlier generation of experts on Neo-Platonism.[121] Theurgy is the term used to refer to a wide range of practices including visits to oracles, divinisation, astrology and finding hidden meanings in texts. While literally meaning only 'divine work' or 'action', all of these activities had the potential to be interpreted as the magical manipulation of the divine. However, in more recent years that type of analysis has been challenged as more sympathetic consideration has been given to Iamblicus's work, in part because of the considerable influence it exercised on the Emperor Julian (361–63 CE) and his attempt to revive paganism.

While still accepting a sharp contrast with the thought of Plotinus and his pupil and biographer, Porphyry,[122] Gregory Shaw, for example, argues that Iamblicus in fact clearly distinguished his own position from astrology and sorcery.[123] Perhaps as a result of accepting a deeper immersion in matter than Plotinus had allowed,[124] he argued that, by attending to the language inherent in matter in token, symbol and sign,[125] human beings could ease the process of their ascent even as the gods descended towards them. In effect, one could align oneself with the will of the World Soul by careful attendance to

[121] For example, J. Rist, 'Mysticism and transcendence in later Neoplatonism', in *Hermes* 92 (1964), 225: 'trend towards irrationalism' which he sees as beginning with Porphyry.

[122] Gregory Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul: The Neoplatonism of Iamblichus* (Kettering: Angelico Press, 1995, 2nd ed., 2014), 13–15.

[123] Ibid., 191, 243.

[124] Whereas for Plotinus part of the soul remained unembodied, for Iamblichus the descent was complete: 13, 25.

[125] Ibid., 183–91.

being receptive to the symbolism immanent in such things as numbers, statues and stars.[126] A more recent book by Crystal Addey doubts whether quite so sharp a contrast should be drawn between earlier and later Neo-Platonism, or indeed even with Plato himself. After all, Plato acknowledged a major role for the Delphic oracle in the life of Socrates. Even if the evidence on Plotinus is less clear, his pupil Porphyry carefully gathered material on the effectiveness of various shrines.[127] In that connection, although much modern literature on Delphi remains quite dismissive,[128] at least one contemporary scholar has suggested that, if the focus is allowed to shift away from questions of prophecy, it becomes possible to read many of the exchanges which took place at the shrine in a positive, religious light.[129]

Whether such a proposal is accepted or not, a not dissimilar subtlety in the identification of symbolism in nature is proposed by these ancient authorities. The rich

[126] Ibid., 57, 162–72.

[127] Porphyry is seen as not far distant (128–42). Even Plotinus, despite not mentioning theurgy (173), can be given a more sympathetic interpretation (149, 290): Crystal Addey, *Divination and Theurgy in Neoplatonism: Oracles of the Gods* (London: Routledge, 2014).

[128] In Joseph Fontenrose's study of the six hundred surviving questions and answers, only those concerned with ritual are deemed veridical: *The Delphic Oracle: Its Responses and Operations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).

[129] Roger Lipsey, *Have You Been to Delphi: Tales of the Ancient Oracle for Modern Minds* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001). Note his conclusion: 'The Delphic oracle did quite well, after all, in reaching to the extremity of our natures, and then beyond to discover a spoken word full of paradox and truth' (257). For another positive but rather different evaluation of Delphi as a 'sense-making mechanism', see Michael Scott, *Delphi* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), esp. 9–30.

allusiveness of the divine ideas discovered through ritual is used to argue against any sharp contrast between theory and practice.[130] Even Plato presents Socrates discovering in a dream a line of Homer with such a hidden code.[131] Again, the fact that we are in effect presented with a form of intellectual purification that is a life-long endeavour makes Iamblichus less distant from Plotinus than might initially have been supposed.[132] Although many of the assumptions about such divine coding in the world will remain inherently strange to the modern mind despite the best efforts of Shaw and Addey, it is intriguing to note that both authors draw parallels with wider religious practice. Addey prefers to look towards eastern transcendental meditation techniques,[133] Shaw finds resonances in a wider Christian sacramentalism.[134] It is the latter comparison which seems the more plausible of the two but, either way, the important point is that what these new insights demonstrate is that it was not a case of pagan philosophy being in flight from reason. Rather, it was a case of seeking an appropriate natural theology, supplemented by a sacramental view of the world. If so, their aims were not too dissimilar after all from the Christian writers of the time.

[130] Ibid., 64–71, 181–89.

[131] Ibid., 59–60; Plato, *Crito* 44B; Homer, *Iliad* 9.363. The surprising treatment of Homer as a religious text is well explored in R. Lamberton, *Homer the Theologian: Neoplatonist Allegorical Reading and the Growth of the Epic Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

[132] Ibid., 25, 194. Effectively, the aim is to so align one's perspective that divine descent on the individual can become a reality.

[133] Ibid., 187, following John Dillon.

[134] Shaw, *Theurgy and the Soul*, 271.

If both my general contentions are true (as I believe they are), we may see influence from ancient philosophy then as the enrichment of Christianity rather than its perversion. This is not to say that every conclusion drawn was right. Quite a number of modern Christian theologians, for example, argue that it is necessary to jettison immutability in order to defend a more involved God. But the point would be that the general conception of the divine which was advocated, as well as a related, sacramental involvement in the world, can be seen as rather more than just 'philosophical' speculation (in the modern sense of philosophy). The divine reality experienced and reflected upon by those pagans was not hopelessly remote from the Christian view, and as such its thought-forms might legitimately be used. As well as formal arguments, there was also an experiential appeal to the sense of all reality being dependent on a single source that was itself dependent on nothing else.[135] Not that disagreements did not arise. Platonism, like Hinduism, would contend that such experience suggests an ultimate form of divinity beyond the personal, but there is no doubt that key forms of influence did prevail, most notably with a more profound stress on the transcendence and mystery of God, as well as a divinity sacramentally involved in the world. In the end not all were persuaded, not least on such questions as divine personhood and immutability. Full consideration of such issues, though, must be postponed until later chapters.

[135] In the notion of divine aseity, the divine 'by itself', that is, not dependent on anything else.

Here, we might conclude with a few tentative remarks that apply to the chapter as a whole, and the transition noted in both the Middle East and classical worlds from polytheism to monotheism. It is easy to think of this move in entirely intellectual terms but another way to think of it is as consequent upon new social perceptions of how the total sum of individual experience of the workings of the divine should be interpreted. Put crudely, polytheism is a natural conclusion to draw from all the various types of experience individuals have of the transcendent Other, in all its variety, with myth one way to order and structure those encounters. But another is to gather together the good among them as the dominating form and so relegate the rest to other causes, either in lesser divinities such as demons or else in the consequences of human behaviour.[136] In short, just as the later Platonists suggested, even to a monotheist the workings of polytheism need not be viewed as necessarily inimical. Postulating plurality in the divine can be seen as genuine religious experience misconstrued rather than as totally false. How far such an analysis can be sustained will be severely tested in Chapter 3, as we explore modern polytheism in Hinduism.

[136] Mostly, the negative side has been focused on a number of lesser divinities such as demons but occasionally a single larger figure is postulated as in Zoroastrianism or in some versions of the Devil. The human comes into play when human sin is deemed to have consequences for the world as a whole.