

CHAPTER 1

The Near Eastern Context

INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides an overview of the history of the ancient Near East, the context in which any historical understanding of the Hebrew Bible must be based. We will review aspects of the modern rediscovery of the ancient Near East and aspects of Mesopotamian, Canaanite, and Egyptian mythology especially.

Early History of the Near East

Life in the ancient Near East can be traced back thousands of years before Bishop Ussher's date for the creation of the world in 4004 B.C.E. There was a settlement at Jericho as early as the eighth millennium B.C.E., and village life developed throughout the Near East in the Neolithic period (8000–4000). With the coming of the Early Bronze Age (3200–2200), the first great civilizations emerged in proximity to the great rivers of the region, the Nile in Egypt, and the Tigris and Euphrates that define Mesopotamia (literally, the land “between the rivers”) in modern Iraq.

In southern Mesopotamia, around the junction and mouth of the two rivers, the Sumerians are credited with developing the earliest known writing system around 3200 B.C.E. The documents were written with reeds

on clay tablets, which were then baked. The Sumerians developed the system of wedge-shaped signs called cuneiform, which was later

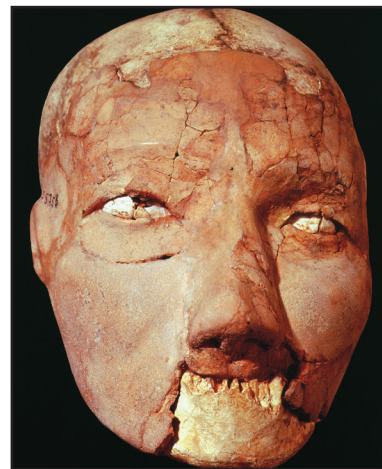


Fig. 1.1 A human skull, recovered in plaster and painted, from Jericho, ca. 6000–4000 B.C.E. Gianni Dagli Orti; ArtResource, NY



Fig. 1.2 Akkadian cuneiform (wedge-shaped) writing: A Neo-Assyrian amulet, ca. 900–600 B.C.E. Museum zu Allerheiligen, Schaffhausen. Commons.
[wikimedia.org](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Amulet.jpg)

used in Akkadian writing; but unlike Akkadian, Sumerian was not a Semitic language. The origin of the Sumerians is unknown. They developed city-states (Uruk, Lagash, Umma) that were diverse among themselves. Shortly before 2300 B.C.E. the Sumerians were conquered by Sargon of Akkad, which was slightly further north in Mesopotamia but still south of Babylon. Akkad gave its name to the Semitic language that remained the main medium of Mesopotamian literature for two thousand years (Akkadian). Sargon and his successors ruled the first Mesopotamian territorial state for almost two centuries. Then Akkad fell and never B.C.E. rose again. Even the location of the city has been lost. After this, the Third Dynasty of Ur united most of Sumer for about a century around the end of

the third millennium. Thereafter the Sumerians faded from history, but they bequeathed to the ancient Near East a rich legacy of art and literature.

The second millennium saw the rise of Babylon under **Hammurabi** (eighteenth century B.C.E.), a king most famous for the code of laws that bears his name. Thereafter Babylon's power declined, and it only became dominant again a thousand years later, under Nebuchadnezzar, the conqueror of Jerusalem in the early sixth century B.C.E. Assyria, in northern Mesopotamia, first became powerful in the early second millennium. The Assyrians attained their greatest power, however, first in the Middle Assyrian period in the thirteenth and twelfth centuries and then especially in the Neo-Assyrian period in the ninth and eighth centuries B.C.E.

Egyptian civilization is almost as old as that of Sumer. A form of writing known as hieroglyphics first appeared around the end of the predynastic period (3100 B.C.E.). Stone buildings appeared shortly thereafter. Many of the great pyramids were constructed during the Old Kingdom (2700–2160). The Middle Kingdom extended from 2033 to 1648. For about a century in the middle of the second millennium (1648–1540), Egypt was ruled by foreigners from Asia known as the Hyksos, who were eventually driven out. In the period of the New Kingdom that followed, Egyptian power was extended all the way to the Euphrates. Egypt ruled over Canaan, the region where Israel would emerge, for much of this period. In the mid-fourteenth century, Pharaoh Amenhotep IV abandoned the traditional worship of the god Amun and devoted himself to the worship of the sun and the solar disk (Aten). He changed his

name to **Akhenaten** and moved his capital to Amarna. This period is known as the Amarna period. It is important because of the monotheistic character of Akhenaten's devotion, but also because of a hoard of tablets from this period that give information about the state of affairs in Canaan. These are the **Amarna letters**, which were letters sent to the pharaoh by vassals in Canaan. These letters figure prominently in discussions of the origin of Israel. After Akhenaten's death, his successor, Tutankhamun, departed from Amarna and reverted to the cult of Amun.

In this period, the main challenge to Egyptian power in Asia came from the Hittites, a people who lived in Anatolia, or modern Turkey. During the Amarna period, the Hittites established a province in Syria. In the thirteenth century, Ramesses II (1279–1213), who is often thought to be the pharaoh of the exodus, fought an indecisive battle against the Hittites at Qadesh on the Orontes in Syria,



Fig. 1.3 Bust of Akhenaten, from the temple at Karnak, now in the Cairo Museum. Photo: Jon Bodsworth; Commons.wikimedia.org.

but Egypt subsequently lost control of most of Syria and Canaan, although Ramesses later regained it in part.

In between Egypt and Mesopotamia lay the land of **Canaan**, where Israel would carve out its territory along the southern half of the eastern shore of the Mediterranean. Canaan also extended further north, including modern Lebanon and part of Syria. It was not a political unit, except insofar as it was unified as an Egyptian province. Rather, it was a loose configuration of city-states. Later, in the first millennium, the Canaanites in the coastal cities of Tyre, Sidon, and Byblos were known as Phoenicians, from the Greek name for the area.

The biblical texts sometimes use the designation "**Amorite**" as an interchangeable variant for "Canaanite." The name comes from *Amurru*, the Akkadian expression for the land in the west (relative to Mesopotamia). The Amorites appear to have originated in northern Syria. Whether they were nomadic or settled is disputed. They appear in Akkadian texts around the end of the third millennium, when they exerted pressure on the urban centers of Mesopotamia. Before the end of the Third Dynasty of Ur, the king had built a wall to keep out the Amorites. Amorites were involved in the destruction of Ur at the beginning of the second millennium, and rulers with Amorite names are found in several Mesopotamian cities early in the second millennium. Amorite rulers also appear in the west, in Ugarit and Byblos. Amorite expansion to the west had presumably also taken place. In the mid-second millennium there was a kingdom of Amurru in the upper Orontes valley in Syria. Biblical texts sometimes refer to the inhabitants of the land that became Israel as

CHRONOLOGY OF ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN HISTORY

Period	Mesopotamia	Egypt
Early Bronze Age (3200–2200 B.C.E.)	3200 B.C.E. Sumerians develop first known writing system 2300 B.C.E. Sumerian city-states (Uruk, Lagash, Umma) Sargon of Akkad conquers the Sumerians	From 3100 B.C.E. Hieroglyphic writing 2700–2160 B.C.E. Old Kingdom Age of the Pyramids
Middle Bronze Age (2200–1550 B.C.E.)	18th century B.C.E. Rise of Babylon under Hammurabi Assyrian kingdom becomes an established power	2160–2106 B.C.E. First Intermediate Period 2033–1648 B.C.E. Middle Kingdom 1648–1540 B.C.E. Second Intermediate Period Hyksos rule in Egypt
Late Bronze Age (1550–1200 B.C.E.)	14th century B.C.E. (Canaan: Kingdom at Ugarit) 1124 B.C.E. Elevation of Marduk under Nebuchad nezzar	1540–1069 B.C.E. New Kingdom Ca. 1350 B.C.E. Amarna Period Akhenaten 1279–1213 B.C.E. Reign of Ramesses II

Amorites, but this may be a loose use of the term.

From the twelfth century on, the people of northern Syria were called **Arameans**. These were not a unified people, but included several small kingdoms. They became a significant factor in the history of Israel in the first millennium.

One final people should be noted to complete this rapid overview of Israel's neighbors and predecessors. The **Philistines** were sea

people who came to Canaan from the Aegean. Their origin remains obscure. They were defeated by Ramesses III about 1190 B.C.E., but they then settled in the coastal towns of Palestine, Ashkelon, Gaza, and Ashdod. Thus the territory they controlled was south of the Canaanite (Phoenician) cities of Tyre and Sidon and immediately adjacent to emerging Israel. The history of the Philistines parallels that of Israel to a great degree, as they were repeatedly subject to the various imperial powers.

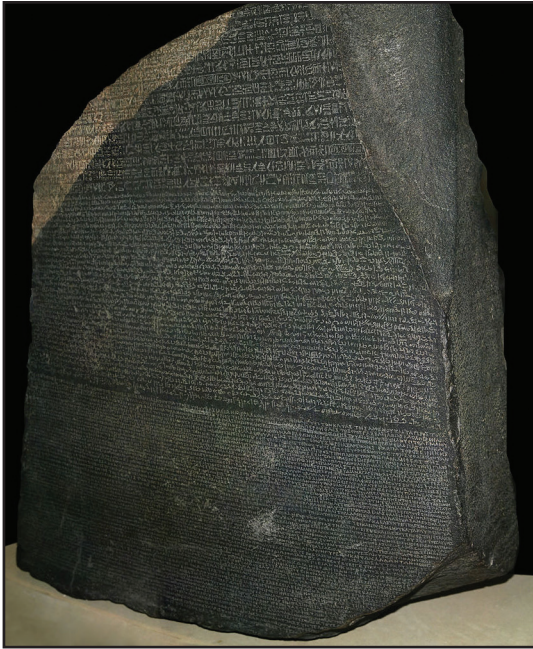


Fig. 1.4 The Rosetta Stone, written in hieroglyphic, Demotic, and Greek. Commons.wikimedia.org

The Modern Rediscovery of the Ancient Near East

For much of Western history, these ancient civilizations were known primarily from the accounts of Greek historians such as Herodotus (fifth century B.C.E.) and from references in the Bible. The modern recovery of the native Near Eastern sources began with Napoleon's expedition to Egypt in 1798–1802. Napoleon took with him a group of scholars whom he charged with the task of preparing a record of the country. In the course of their work, they found an inscription on stone in Greek, classical Egyptian (hieroglyphics), and Egyptian demotic script (a popular form of Egyptian from the later

half of the first millennium B.C.E.). This inscription became known as the Rosetta Stone. Since the same text was written in both Greek and Egyptian, it became possible to decipher hieroglyphics for the first time. (Names that were identified in all parts of the inscription provided the key.) The decipherment was accomplished by a French scholar, Jean-François Champollion.

The rediscovery of ancient Mesopotamia also began in the early nineteenth century. An employee of the East India Tea Company named Claudius Rich carried out a study of the ruins of Babylon, beginning in 1807. His collection of artifacts, including many cuneiform tablets, was purchased by the British Museum. The first explorations of Assyrian sites (Nineveh, Khorsabad) were carried out in the 1840s by a Frenchman, Paul-Émile Botta, and then, beginning in 1845, by an Englishman, Austen Henry Layard, who excavated palaces at Nimrud and Nineveh. Large quantities of Assyrian sculpture found their way to the British Museum, and some to private collectors in England. The key to the decipherment of Akkadian was provided by an inscription by a Persian king Darius on the rock of Behistun in Persia. The Behistun inscription was written with cuneiform signs in Old Persian, Elamite, and Akkadian. The decipherment was accomplished mainly by H. C. Rawlinson, an Englishman, and Edward Hincks, an Irishman, in the 1850s. In the 1870s, the great works of Akkadian literature such as the creation story *Enuma Elish* and the **Gilgamesh Epic** were discovered and first translated. The Babylonian flood story, which was contained in the Epic of Gilgamesh, caused a sensation because of its similarity to the story of Noah and the ark.

Other major discoveries followed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These included the Amarna letters, noted above, in 1887. A discovery of major importance for biblical studies was made at **Ugarit** (Ras Shamra), B.C.E. on the Mediterranean coast in northern Syria in 1929. A French archaeologist, Claude Schaeffer, discovered over two thousand texts, written in cuneiform script, in a language that proved to be closely related to Hebrew. These texts date from the fourteenth century B.C.E. and include some myths, or sacred stories, as well as ritual texts, legal records, diplomatic correspondence, and other documents. A few years later, beginning in 1933, another major discovery was made at **Mari**, on the Euphrates, by another French expedition led by André Parrot. More than twenty thousand tablets were discovered. The most important of these date to the eighteenth century B.C.E. More recently, a major discovery of cuneiform tablets was made at **Ebla** Tell Mardikh, near Aleppo in northwestern Syria) by an Italian expedition led by Paolo Matthiae, beginning in 1964. The Ebla tablets date to the third millennium B.C.E. and constitute the largest single find of cuneiform texts from this early period (approximately 1,750 tablets). Another major find of some eight hundred tablets was made at another site in Syria, Emar (modern Meskene), in the mid-1970s.

Aspects of Near Eastern Religion

The worship of gods and goddesses was a significant part of life in the ancient Near East. It is important to bear in mind, however, that

religion was not standardized and systematized in the ways that are familiar to us from Christianity and Judaism. Each city-state had its own cult and its own assembly of gods, headed by the chief god or goddess of that city. The city-states were not isolated from each other, however, and there were periods when various cities in a region were unified—as happened, for example, under Sargon of Akkad and under Hammurabi of Babylon. The status of gods rose and fell with the fortunes of their city-states. Throughout Mesopotamian history, beginning in the Sumerian period, scribes tried to impose order on the multiplicity of gods by composing god lists.

There was, moreover, a corpus of literature that circulated widely in the ancient Near East. As part of their training in Akkadian, scribes had to copy out a prescribed body of standard texts. Consequently, the same works could be found at widely different locations at diverse dates. Copies of the Epic of Gilgamesh were found at Emar on the Euphrates, in the Hittite capital in modern Turkey, and at Megiddo in what later became the land of Israel, all in the late second millennium. Other copies come from Assyrian collections centuries later. Modern scholars often refer to such texts as “canonical,” but it is important to bear in mind that the “canon” or standard they established was literary, and that it did not involve an orthodoxy in religious belief. Nonetheless, these standard texts were not idiosyncratic and can be taken as representative of Near Eastern beliefs, even if they were not normative in the sense later associated with the Bible.

We may get an impression of the Mesopotamian view of the world by considering some of the myths or stories about the origin of the

world and of humanity. The word “myth” is derived from the Greek *mythos*, or story, but is used especially for sacred or traditional stories deemed to have religious import. In modern English usage, “myth” is often opposed to factual truth, but this is unfortunate, as it makes it difficult to take myths seriously. The ancient myths are serious but imaginative attempts to explain life in this world. There are several minor creation stories preserved in Akkadian, many of them in the introductions to ritual texts. Two myths stand out, however, because of their length and wide distribution. These are the myth of **Atrahasis** and the *Enuma Elish*.

Atrahasis

The story of Atrahasis is most fully preserved in an Old Babylonian version from about 1700 B.C.E. Over seven hundred lines of this version have been published. Other copies come from the library of the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal in the seventh century B.C.E. The text, then, was copied for at least a thousand years.

The story begins at a point before the creation of humankind, “when the gods instead of man did the work, bore the loads.” But there was already a hierarchy among the gods. As in other early Mesopotamian myths, the chief gods were Anu (or An in Sumerian texts), Enlil, and Enki. When the gods cast lots and divided the world, Anu took the sky, Enlil the earth, and Enki the waters below the earth. (Each had other gods associated with him.) The labor of agriculture was imposed on a class of gods called the Igigu. The first section of the myth deals with the rebellion of these worker gods, which led the high gods to concede that their workload was too heavy.

Consequently, Enki and the mother-goddess (called Mami/Mama, Nintu and *Belet-ili*) created humanity “to bear the load of the gods.” They slaughtered “a god who had intelligence” (probably the god who had the idea for the rebellion), and Nintu mixed clay with his flesh and blood. From this mixture, she fashioned seven males and seven females.

The second section of the myth goes on to give the early history of humankind, culminating in the story of a great deluge. After six hundred years the people became too numerous, and “the country was as noisy as a bellowing bull.” Enlil made a complaint in the council of the gods, and a plague was sent to reduce humanity. At this point, the hero who gives his name to the story emerges: “Now there was one Atrahasis whose ear was open to his god Enki” (the name Atrahasis means “very wise”). Enki advised him to have humanity withhold offerings from all the gods except the one who controlled the plague, and eventually that god relented and put an end to the affliction. Enlil made a number of similar attempts to reduce humanity at six-hundred-year intervals, but each time Enki instructed Atrahasis and the danger was averted. (When the other gods forbade Enki to speak to the man, he conveyed his revelation in dreams.) Finally, the gods sent a flood to wipe humanity off the face of the earth. Enki instructed Atrahasis to build a boat that was big enough to ride out the deluge. Atrahasis took his family and livestock on board. The flood lasted seven days and seven nights and wiped out the rest of humanity. The gods, other than Enlil, were horrified at the destruction, but they were mainly affected by the fact that they were deprived of their offerings. When the flood subsided, Atrahasis made an offering

in thanksgiving. When the gods smelled the odor, “they gathered like flies over the offering.” There were bitter recriminations against Enlil, but he in turn attacked Enki for frustrating the will of the gods. Enki defended himself by saying that he acted so that life would be preserved. In the end, the gods devised a new scheme for population control. Some women would be barren, some children would die at birth, and some categories of priestesses would not bear children at all.

This story is obviously important for understanding the biblical book of Genesis. For the present, however, we are concerned only with the light it throws on Mesopotamian religion. Two of the most prominent features of the story stand in contrast with modern conceptions of God. First, the gods are anthropomorphic: they are conceived and portrayed in the likeness of human beings. They feel hunger, are troubled by noise, are wearied by labor, argue among themselves, and, in the case of Enki, can be deceitful. Second, there is a whole society of gods, analogous to a human society. Especially important is the role of the council of the gods, where the gods deliberate and arrive at decisions. These gods are not fully in control of events. Rather, they react to crises as they develop. Moreover, they are not, as a group, the guardians of a moral order. The crises develop for various reasons: overwork in the case of the Igigu, overpopulation in the case of humanity. The actions that lead to the crises are not necessarily wrong or sinful. The gods react differently to these crises, and the eventual solutions are reached by compromise. While Enki frustrates the designs of Enlil, in the end they arrive at a balance of forces rather than the dominance of any one god. While the main emphasis is on the social character of the divine council, the

story also notes that a human being (Atrahasis) can have a personal relationship with a particular god (in this case, Enki).

The Atrahasis story also throws some light on the way in which ancient literature was composed. The first part of the myth draws on the Sumerian myth of Enki and Ninmah, where Ninmah creates seven defective humans and Enki finds useful occupations for them. The story of the flood was also already known in Sumerian sources. It also appears in the story of Gilgamesh. Atrahasis, then, was not entirely an original composition, but was rather fashioned as a new work out of traditional materials.

Enuma Elish

The *Enuma Elish* was composed some centuries later than Atrahasis, probably in the reign of Nebuchadnezzar I of Babylon (1125–1104 B.C.E.). It celebrates the rise of Marduk, god of Babylon, to a position of leadership among the gods. It was only in the time of Nebuchadnezzar that Marduk was granted that status. This myth was widely copied. It was recited on the fourth day of the New Year’s festival, the Akitu. It was still copied in the Hellenistic period in the third century B.C.E.

The *Enuma Elish* begins at an earlier point in primordial time than does the Atrahasis story:

*When skies above were not yet named
Nor earth below pronounced by name,
Apsu, the first one, their begetter
And maker Tiamat, who bore them all,
Had mixed their waters together
But had not formed pastures, nor discovered
reed-beds;*

*When yet no gods were manifest,
Nor names pronounced nor destinies decreed,
Then gods were born within them.*

(trans. S. Dalley, *Myths from
Mesopotamia*, 233)

At the beginning, then, only the primordial pair, Apsu and Tiamat, were on the scene. (Both Apsu and Tiamat represent primordial waters. Some scholars think that Apsu represented the fresh waters beneath the earth while Tiamat represented the salt waters, or sea.) The story proceeds with the theogony, or begetting of the gods, which must come before the creation of humanity. Here it is the young gods who create a tumult. Finally, Apsu, with his counselor Mummu, goes to Tiamat and complains:

*Their ways have become very grievous to me,
By day I cannot rest, by night I cannot sleep.
I shall abolish their ways and disperse them.
Let peace prevail so that we can sleep.*

(Dalley, *Myths*, 234)

Tiamat resists the proposal (“How could we allow what we ourselves created to perish?”), but Mummu supports it. The young gods, however, learn of the plot because of the wisdom of Ea. Ea then devised a spell, put Apsu to sleep, and slew him. He set up his dwelling on top of Apsu. There he begat new gods, Bel and Marduk. Anu, father of Ea, created four winds and gave them to Marduk to play with. But the winds stirred up Tiamat and made some gods restless, and they incited Tiamat to action. Tiamat then prepared for battle and made Qingu leader of her army. Again, Ea discovered what was happening. Ea and Anu in turn tried to confront Tiamat but were intimidated and turned back. At last, Ea urged

Marduk to come forward. Marduk agreed to fight Tiamat on one condition:

*“If indeed I am to be your champion,
If I am to defeat Tiamat and save your
lives,*

*Convene the council, name a special fate . . .
And let me, my own utterance shall fix fate
instead of you!*

*Whatever I create shall never be altered!
Let a decree from my lips shall never be
revoked, never changed!”*

The gods granted his demand:

*“You are honoured among the great gods.
Your destiny is unequalled, your word (has
the power of) Anu! . . .*

*May your utterance be law, your word never
falsified.”*

(Dalley, *Myths*, 248-9)

They proclaimed Marduk king and gave him a throne and scepter.

Marduk and Tiamat engaged in battle. He released a wind in her face. When she opened her mouth to swallow it, she could not close her lips. Then Marduk shot in an arrow that slit her heart and killed her. He rounded up the gods who supported Tiamat and smashed their weapons. He cut the corpse of Tiamat in two, put up half of it to make the sky and arranged her waters so that they could not escape. He then proceeded to establish the constellations of the stars as stations for the great gods. He devised a plan to create humankind, to do the work of the gods so that they might be at leisure. Ea then made humankind from the blood of Qingu, the ally of Tiamat. Finally, he gave the command to create Babylon. The gods labored for a year to construct Babylon and the temple Esagila. On its completion, Marduk invited them to

a banquet in the temple. The myth ends with a lengthy litany of the names and praises of Marduk.

The *Enuma Elish* celebrates the exaltation of Marduk, god of Babylon, to kingship among the gods. This development evidently corresponds to the emergence of Babylon as a world power, but it is not a simple political allegory. Rather, the story encapsulates a view of the world. Tiamat is a complex and fascinating figure. She is Mother Nature, at one point concerned for the survival of her offspring, at another ready to devour them. She is not evil; indeed, she is only slowly provoked to rage. But since she is a threat to the lives of the young gods, she must be destroyed. If life is to flourish on earth, nature must be subdued.

The story has a clear formula for establishing a successful society. Faced with the threat of Tiamat, the gods realize that they need to unite behind the strong leadership of a king. The kingship of Marduk among the gods carries a strong implication that kingship is also necessary in human society. There is a clear symmetry between the king and his palace and the god and his temple. The myth can easily be read as a story composed to legitimate the rise of monarchy. But a story like this has many meanings, and we should not try to reduce it to a simple political message.

The monarchical kingship of Marduk, even though it is still accompanied by the council of the gods, must be seen as a step in the direction of monotheism. Theoretical monotheism, the belief that only one god exists, was rare in the ancient world, and became possible only with the rise of Greek philosophy. In the Babylonian myth, the reality of other gods is freely granted, but Marduk is preeminent among the gods. In the Bible too, the psalmist

will ask, “Who is like you among the gods, O LORD?” (Exod 15:11). There are differences, to be sure, between the biblical and the Mesopotamian views of divinity, but there is also continuity.

Like the Atrahasis myth, *Enuma Elish* drew on earlier sources and was part of a stream of tradition. One of its sources is the Myth of Anzu. There, too, a young hero-god does battle with a monster. In this case, the monster is Anzu, who steals the tablets of destiny. The hero-god Ninurta defeats him by lopping off his wings and proceeds to provide water to the land that had previously been lacking.

The Epic of Gilgamesh

The *Enuma Elish* is almost entirely concerned with the realm of the gods. But Mesopotamian literature also contains one of the most remarkable dramatizations of the human condition that have come down to us from antiquity. This is the Epic of Gilgamesh. This work is called an epic rather than a myth, because the main characters are human, although gods and goddesses also intervene in the action. (Some people refer to the *Enuma Elish* as “the epic of creation,” but this usage is loose, and is better avoided). Gilgamesh was regarded in antiquity as a historical character. He may have lived in the third millennium, in Uruk (Warka) in southern Mesopotamia. The epic, however, developed over many centuries. Its relation to history may be similar to that of Homer’s epics, which also have a starting point in history but are essentially works of fiction and imagination.

Several stories about Gilgamesh were current in Sumerian before 2000 B.C.E. These

were short stories, which eventually served as the bases for episodes in the epic. They included separate stories about Gilgamesh and other main characters in the epic: Enkidu, Humbaba, and the Bull of Heaven. There is a story of the death of Gilgamesh. The flood story seems to have been an independent tale in Sumerian. A composite epic is found in Old Babylonian tablets from the early second millennium. It is not clear, however, whether the whole epic was already unified at this point. Fragments of various parts of the story are found at a wide range of locations in the mid- to late second millennium. The most complete version comes from Nineveh (in Assyria) in the early seventh century B.C.E. It is possible to trace the development of the epic over more than a thousand years.

According to the epic, Gilgamesh, king of Uruk, was two-thirds divine and one-third mortal. He had no rival, but his excessive energy was a problem and made him overbearing. He would not leave young women alone, and the gods often heard their complaints. Eventually the gods created someone to be a match for him, a primitive man named Enkidu, who lived with the beasts on the steppe. He was discovered by a hunter, who told Gilgamesh about him. Gilgamesh dispatched a harlot with the hunter. They waited for Enkidu at the watering place. The harlot opened her garments and “did for him, the primitive man, as women do.” Enkidu lay with her for six days and seven nights. When he tried to return to the animals, however, they shied away from him and he could not keep pace with them. The harlot consoled him:

“You have become [profound], Enkidu, you have become like a god.

Why should you roam open country with wild beasts?

Come, let me take you into Uruk the Sheepfold . . .

Where Gilgamesh is perfect in strength.”

(Dalley, *Myths*, 56)

Enkidu goes to Uruk, where he becomes a well-matched companion for Gilgamesh. He puts on clothes and learns to eat and drink in the human fashion.

Together, Gilgamesh and Enkidu undertake great adventures. First they kill Humbaba, the giant of the forest. When they return to Uruk, Gilgamesh is so resplendent that the goddess Ishtar becomes enamored of him and proposes marriage. Gilgamesh, however, insults her by recalling the misfortunes that have befallen her former lovers. Ishtar persuades Anu, the god of heaven, to give her the Bull of Heaven to punish Gilgamesh and Uruk. But Enkidu subdues the bull and Gilgamesh kills it.

By killing Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven, Gilgamesh and Enkidu win fame and acclamation in Uruk, but they incur the displeasure of the gods. It is decreed that one of them must die, and the sentence falls on Enkidu, who learns of his fate in a dream. Enkidu complains to Shamash, the sun-god, and curses the hunter and the harlot who first brought him to Uruk. Shamash, however, points out all the good things that came to Enkidu because of the harlot. Enkidu agrees and changes the fate of the harlot to a blessing: “Governors and princes shall love you. . . . Because of you, the mother of seven, the honored wife, shall be deserted.”

When Enkidu dies, Gilgamesh mourns bitterly: “Shall I die too? Am I not like



Fig. 1.5 A horned figure (Enkidu?) fights a lion. Cylinder seal impression from ancient Babylon.

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Enkidu? . . . I am afraid of Death, and so I roam the country.” He decides to visit Utnapishtim, the flood hero (the counterpart of Atrahasis in the Atrahasis story), who was granted eternal life and now lives far away at the ends of the earth. The journey takes Gilgamesh into the mountain in the west where the sun sets, through a dark tunnel to the sunrise at the other side. He comes to the shore of the sea that circles the earth, where he finds an inn kept by an alewife, Siduri. He tells her his story and asks for directions. She sees that his quest is hopeless:

*“Gilgamesh, where do you roam?
You will not find the eternal life you seek.
When the gods created mankind
They appointed death for mankind,
Kept eternal life in their own hands.
So, Gilgamesh, let your stomach be full,
Day and night enjoy yourself in every way,
Every day arrange for pleasures.*

*Day and night, dance and play,
Wear fresh clothes.
Keep your head washed, bathe in water,
Appreciate the child who holds your hand,
Let your wife enjoy herself in your lap.
This is the work [of the living].”*

(Old Babylonian version; Dalley, *Myths*, 150)

She does, however, direct him to Urshanabi, boatman of Utnapishtim. Gilgamesh prevails on the boatman to ferry him over to Utnapishtim, who again lectures him on the inevitability of death. When Gilgamesh presses him as to how he obtained eternal life, Utnapishtim tells him the story of the flood. Before Gilgamesh sets out on his return journey, however, Utnapishtim tells him about a plant that grows in the Apsu, the fresh waters beneath the earth, that has the power to rejuvenate or make the old young again. Gilgamesh dives and brings up the plant. On the way back, however, he stops to bathe in a pool, and while he is doing so, a snake carries off the plant. At this point Gilgamesh becomes resigned. When they return to Uruk, he displays the walls of Uruk to Urshanabi, with the implication that the city walls have a permanence that is denied to human beings, even to heroes.

The story of Gilgamesh needs little commentary. It is a poignant reflection on human mortality that belongs to the classics of world literature. In contrast to what we find in the Bible, morality is not a consideration in this story. The exploits of Gilgamesh and Enkidu are neither good nor bad. They win fame for the heroes, but they also bring about their fall. There is a nice appreciation of both the curses and the blessings that attend the harlot.

The gods are sometimes capricious (especially Ishtar), sometimes reasonable (Shamash). In the end, however, death is the great leveler of humanity. As Utnapishtim remarks, death is inevitable for Gilgamesh as for the fool.

The Role of Goddesses

The role of Ishtar in the Gilgamesh Epic draws attention to an aspect of Near Eastern religion that stands in contrast to what we find in the Hebrew Bible. Deities are both male and female; goddesses figure in the stories beside the gods. We have seen the roles of the mother-goddesses Mami/Belit-ili and Tiamat in the creation stories. In general, the roles assigned to the goddesses decline in the second millennium. In Atrahasis, Enki and Mami collaborate to make human beings. In *Enuma Elish*, Ea (the Babylonian counterpart of Enki) makes them alone. There is still a mother-goddess, Tiamat, but she has no role in the creation of humanity, and she is part of the old order that Marduk must defeat. In Sumerian texts, the mother-goddess Ninhursag appears as the third of the triad of most powerful deities, after Anu and Enlil. In the second millennium, however, she is replaced by the wise god Enki, as we see in the Atrahasis myth.

One goddess who did not decline in importance in the second millennium was Ishtar. The name Ishtar derives from the Semitic word *'attar*. A masculine god with this name appears in Ugaritic texts, and the feminine Astarte is known in the Bible. Ishtar was identified with the Sumerian goddess Inanna and is associated with fertility in all its aspects. She is the goddess of thunderstorms and rain, and perhaps because of this association, she is

also the goddess of battle. (Gods of thunderstorms were often envisaged as warriors riding the chariots into battle.) Above all, she was the goddess of sexual attraction. She was also associated with the morning star. She is most probably the goddess venerated as the “queen of heaven” (Jer 44:17, 19).

Inanna/Ishtar is associated with the shepherd king Dumuzi (Babylonian Tammuz) in several stories, most notably a story of her Descent to the Netherworld. After a passionate courtship with Dumuzi, they celebrate a sacred marriage. Another phase of the myth deals with the death of Dumuzi. This is described variously in the texts. In some, Inanna mourns him bitterly. According to the story of the Descent of Inanna, however, she is responsible for his demise. Inanna visits the netherworld, where her sister Ereshkigal turns her into a corpse. She is eventually revived and allowed to ascend, but on condition that she find a substitute. She finds that Dumuzi has not been grief-stricken in her absence, and designates him as the substitute to go down to the netherworld. In the end an arrangement is made whereby Dumuzi and his sister spend alternate halves of the year in the netherworld. This arrangement is related to the seasonal cycle of death and rebirth.

The relationship between Inanna and Dumuzi was ritualized in the cultic celebration of the sacred marriage between the king and a priestess representing Inanna. The sacred marriage was a ritual to ensure fertility, of the fields as well as of people. The texts often use agricultural metaphors in connection with Inanna and the sacred marriage (e.g., “Inanna, your breast is your field”). The rejection of Ishtar by Gilgamesh is remarkable in view of the Sumerian tradition of the sacred marriage,

but this tradition faded in the second millennium, and the king no longer played the part of the god in the marriage ritual. Ishtar, however, was associated not only with marriage but also with extramarital sex and prostitution. She is not a maternal figure, and despite her marriage to Dumuzi, she remains an unencumbered woman. As such she is a marginal figure, at once a subject of fascination and attraction and of fear. She represents both sex and violence, and even, because of her descent to the netherworld, death. The ambivalence of Ishtar is prominently expressed in the Epic of Gilgamesh. Yet the conclusion of the epic refers to Ishtar's temple as a prominent feature of the city of Uruk, in which Gilgamesh apparently takes pride.



Fig. 1.6 Babylonian relief, nineteenth or eighteenth century B.C.E., of a winged and eagle-footed goddess (Ishtar?); known as the “Queen of the Night”; now in the British Museum. Commons. [wikimedia.org](https://commons.wikimedia.org)

Canaanite Mythology

Our sources for Canaanite mythology are much less extensive than those for Mesopotamia. Until the discovery of the tablets at Ugarit in 1929, we were dependent on the polemical accounts of Canaanite religion in the Bible and some information in Greek sources (especially Philo of Byblos), which are late and problematic. Whether Ugarit is properly described as Canaanite is a matter of dispute, but the gods that appear in the Ugaritic tablets (El, Baal, Anat, etc.) are the same deities that figure in the Hebrew Bible. The Ugaritic texts are the best representatives we have of Canaanite religion in the second half of the first millennium. Here again we should remember that there was no orthodoxy in ancient Near Eastern religion and that different myths, or different forms of these myths, may have circulated in other locations.

In the Ugaritic pantheon, El was king and father of the gods. His decree is wise and his wisdom eternal. The word *El* is familiar from Hebrew, where it is both the common noun for “god” and a designation for the God of Israel (YHWH). El is said to live in a tent on a mountain that is the source of two rivers. He presides over assemblies of “the sons of El,” the council of the gods.

By the time the Ugaritic myths were composed, however, El's position among the gods was largely ceremonial. At least in the Baal cycle of myths, Baal emerges as the dominant figure, although his claim to rule is still challenged by Yamm (Sea) and Mot (Death). Three goddesses figure prominently in the stories: Asherah, wife of El; Anat, sister and

wife of Baal; and Astarte, who is the least prominent of the three.

The Baal Cycle from Ugarit resembles *Enuma Elish* insofar as it describes a conflict among the gods that culminates in the establishment of a king (in this case, Baal). The two myths may be related. Tiamat in the Babylonian myth is related to the Deep or the Sea (the Hebrew cognate *t'hom* is the word used for the Deep in the opening verses of Genesis), and the Sea does battle with Baal in the Canaanite myth. The Ugaritic text does not discuss the creation of the world, but it is often described as cosmogonic (that is, a story of the origin of the world), as it can be read as an account of how things came to be the way they are. The first episode of the myth begins when Yamm (Sea) demands that the assembly of the gods surrender Baal into his power. The gods are intimidated by the violent approach of the messengers, and El agrees to hand Baal over. Baal, however, refuses to submit. Instead, he gets two clubs, fashioned by the divine craftsman, Kothar-wa-Hasis. With these he

*struck Prince Sea on the skull
Judge River between the eyes.
Sea stumbled; he fell to the ground;
his joints shook, his frame collapsed.
Baal captured and pierced Sea;
He finished off Judge River.*

(trans. M. D. Coogan and M. S. Smith,
Stories from Ancient Canaan,
2nd ed. 113)

Thereupon Astarte proclaims:

*Hail, Baal the Conqueror!
Hail, Rider of the clouds!
For Prince Sea is our captive,
Judge River is our captive.*

Another passage in the myth says that Baal finished off Lotan, the fleeing serpent, the seven-headed monster. This is probably another way of referring to the same victory. Lotan appears in the Bible as Leviathan (Job 3:8; 41:1; Pss 74:13-14; 104:26; Isa 27:1).

A second episode of the myth begins with the construction of Baal's house and a celebratory banquet. At first Baal resists the advice of Kothar-wa-Hasis that he should have a window in his house, but after the banquet he changes his mind. (A window was thought to provide an entry for Death: Compare Jer 9:21.)

The third episode of the myth presents a more serious challenge to Baal on the part of

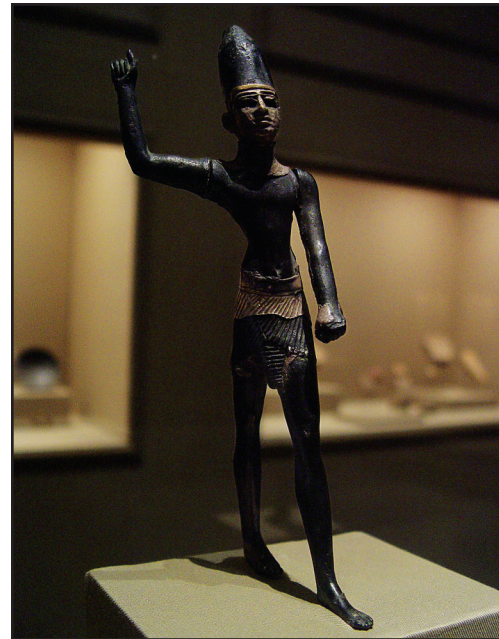


Fig. 1.7 Figurine of a warrior god (Ba'al?) from Syria, ca. 1550–1150 B.C.E. From the Mr. and Mrs. Allen C. Balch Collection, Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Commons.

wikimedia.org

Mot, or Death. Baal is terrified and declares that he is Mot's servant forever. The story vividly describes how Death swallows Baal:

*One lip to the earth, one lip to the heavens;
... his tongue to the stars.
Baal must enter inside him;
He must go down into his mouth like a dried
olive,
the earth's produce, the fruit of the trees.*
(Coogan and Smith, *Stories*, 141)

Baal's death is greeted with widespread mourning. El gets down from his throne and rolls in the dust. Anat gashes her skin with a knife. Both express concern as to what will happen to the people if Baal is dead. El offers to make one of Asherah's sons king in place of Baal. One of them, Athtar, tries out Baal's throne, but his feet do not reach the footstool. Finally, Anat confronts Mot:

*She seized El's son Death;
with a sword she split him;
with a sieve she winnowed him;
with fire she burned him;
with millstones she ground him;
in the fields she sowed him.*
(Coogan and Smith, *Stories*, 148)

Baal then returns to life, and the heavens rain down oil and the wadis (or gullies) run with honey. Finally, there is a tussle between Baal and Mot. Both are strong and fall. The Sun warns Mot that El will be displeased and will undermine his throne, and at that Mot becomes fearful.

While the Baal cycle has much in common with *Enuma Elish*, it does not seem to have the same political implications as the Babylonian myth. Rather, like the myth of Inanna and Dumuzi, it seems to reflect the

seasonal changes, at least in the struggle of Baal and Mot. When Baal dies, there is no rain. The wadis dry up and the fields are dry. When he comes back to life, the rain comes again. This story is not concerned with morality any more than the Babylonian myth. Mot is not evil, he is just a power that must be given his due. In the end there is some equilibrium between Baal and Mot. A striking feature of the Canaanite mythology is the violence of the goddess Anat, who not only dismembers Death but also berates the high god El on occasion and threatens to smash his skull if he does not comply with her wishes.

Baal's victory over the Sea is more decisive. We may imagine that the image of a monster with seven heads was suggested by the waves of the sea, beating against the Mediterranean coast. In the Hebrew Bible, we shall find the idea that the work of creation involved setting limits to the sea (Ps 104:9). The sea must be restrained so that dry land can emerge. Both Sea and Death may be considered chaos monsters: they are forces that threaten the survival of life. In this they resemble Tiamat in the Babylonian myth. Baal, like Marduk, is a god who protects life, but Baal has much stronger overtones of fertility.

All the characters in the Baal myth are gods or goddesses. But the Canaanites also had stories with human heroes. One such story tells of a man named Danel, who had no son and besought one from the gods. This Danel is mentioned as a legendary wise man in Ezek 14:14, where he is associated with Noah and Job, and again in Ezek 28:3, where the prophet asks rhetorically, "Are you wiser than Danel." (The name is often translated as "Daniel," by analogy with the hero of the biblical book of Daniel.) In the Ugaritic story,

Danel is depicted as a king or local ruler, who sits at the entrance to the city gate, presiding over legal disputes involving widows and orphans. His prayers are answered, and he is given a son named Aqhat.

The son is given a present of a bow by the divine craftsman Kothar-wa-Hasis, but this wonderful present is a cause of misfortune for Aqhat. It attracts the attention of the goddess Anat. She offers Aqhat gold and silver for the bow, and when he refuses, she offers him immortality: “You’ll be able to match years with Baal, months with the sons of El.” But Aqhat replies:

*“Don’t lie to me, maiden,
for to a hero your lies are filth.
A mortal—what does he get in the end? . . .
glaze poured on his head,
lime on top of his skull.
As every man dies, I will die;
yes, I too will surely die.”*

(Coogan and Smith, *Stories*, 42)

He goes on to insult her by saying that she has no business with a bow, as women do not hunt.

This episode resembles the encounter of Gilgamesh and Ishtar, but Anat is more successful than Ishtar in getting her revenge. She makes her servant Yatpan take the form of a vulture and strike Aqhat on the skull and kill him. In his mourning, the father Danel places a curse on nature:

*For seven years let Baal fail,
eight, the Rider on the Clouds:
no dew, no showers,
no surging of the two seas,
no benefit of Baal’s voice.*

(Coogan and Smith, *Stories*, 47-8)

(Baal’s voice was the thunder.) The death of Aqhat, then, results in a crisis in fertility, even if not on the same scale as that which followed the death of Baal. After the seven years of mourning, Aqhat’s sister, Pagat, sets out to avenge her brother. She goes to Yatpan’s tent and plies him with wine. Unfortunately the ending of the story is lost, but presumably she gets her revenge by killing Yatpan. The motif of the woman who visits a man with the intention of killing him appears again in the book of Judith, in the Apocrypha, at the end of the Old Testament.

The story of Aqhat is fragmentary, and so it is difficult to discern its central purpose. It certainly shows the inevitability of death, even for a hero, just as the story of Gilgamesh did. But it also throws light on some aspects of everyday life in the ancient Near East. For example, when Baal relays Danel’s wish for a son to the council of the gods, he petitions:

*Let him have a son in his house,
an heir inside his palace,
to set up a stela for his divine ancestor,
a votive marker for his clan in the
sanctuary . . .
to hold his hand when he is drunk,
support him when he is full of wine . . .
to patch his roof when it gets muddy,
wash his clothes when they are dirty.*

(Coogan and Smith, *Stories*, 35-6)

We are told that Pagat “gets up early to draw water,” knows the course of the stars, saddles a donkey, and lifts her father onto it. The story then is a portrayal of life in ancient times, whether it had some more specific purpose or not.



Fig. 1.8 Bronze female figurine (Anat). From Syria, second millennium B.C.E. Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore.

[Commons.wikimedia.org](https://commons.wikimedia.org)

Another cycle of stories from Ugarit tells the tale of a king named Keret or Kirta, who, like Job, saw his numerous family destroyed. The gods grant him a new family, but he is afflicted by illness and has to contend with a challenge to his rule by his son. The latter

episode recalls the revolt of David's son Absalom in 2 Samuel.

Egyptian Religion

As in Mesopotamia and Canaan, religion in ancient Egypt was subject to local variations and had no overarching orthodoxy. The status of deities rose and fell with the fortunes of their cities. The Old Kingdom, in the second half of the third millennium B.C.E., had its capital at Memphis. In the Memphite theology, the preeminent god was the creator-god Ptah. The priesthood of Heliopolis, however, exalted the god Atum as creator. The New Kingdom, in the second half of the second millennium, had its capital at Thebes in Middle Egypt, and here the god Amun came to prominence and was linked with the sun-god Re. Several different gods appear as creators in Egyptian myths: Ptah, Re, Atum, Amun, Khnum, but there is only one creator in any given myth. The multiplicity of creation emerges out of an original unity. Other gods, however, also figure in these myths. The sun-god Re was universally worshiped and appears in almost every creation myth, although his role varies. The process of creation also varied. In the theology of Heliopolis, the sun-god emerged from the abyss on a primal mound and created the first pair of deities by masturbation or spittle. The god Ptah was said to conceive in his heart the things he wanted to create and bring them into existence by uttering a word. The god Khnum, in contrast, was a potter-god who fashioned human beings as a potter fashions clay. The models of creation by a word and of fashioning like a potter appear in the Bible, but on the whole the Bible is much closer to

the idiom of the Canaanite and Mesopotamian texts than to that of the Egyptian myths.

The Egyptian creation stories place less emphasis on conflict than was the case in *Enuma Elish* or the Baal myth. The main mythical conflict in Egyptian tradition was the conflict of Horus and Seth. Seth is the symbol of chaos and evil (the Greeks identified him with Typhon). He murders his brother and rival, Osiris. Isis, widow and sister of Osiris, recovers his body and conceives his son Horus. Horus engages in many struggles with Seth and eventually defeats him. Horus was the defender of the pharaoh, and the pharaoh was regarded as the living Horus. After death, the pharaoh was identified with Osiris. Osiris became the king of the dead and symbolized the hope for eternal life.

One of the most striking features of ancient Egyptian culture was the pervasive belief in life after death. It is to this belief that we owe the pyramids. Many of the artifacts that stock the Egyptian section of modern Western museums were discovered in tombs, where they had been buried as provisions for



Fig. 1.9 The Egyptian god Khnum (seated, left) models the goddess Ihy on a potter's wheel; relief from the Dendera Temple, Egypt. Commons.

[wikimedia.org](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Khnum_modeling_Ihy.jpg)

the deceased in the afterlife. There is a considerable corpus of Egyptian literature that deals in some way with death and the afterlife. The most ancient corpus of Egyptian religious texts are the Pyramid texts: spells for the protection of the deceased inscribed on the inside walls of the pyramids. In the Middle Kingdom, such spells were inscribed on the panels of wooden coffins and are called the Coffin texts. In the New Kingdom many of these spells appear on papyrus scrolls in Books of the Dead.

One episode in the history of Egyptian religion has often been thought to have influenced the development of monotheism in Israel. This was the religious reform of the pharaoh Amenophis IV, also known as Akhenaten (about 1350 B.C.E.). This pharaoh broke with the traditional cult of Amun at Thebes. He moved his capital to Amarna or Akhetaten, further north on the Nile, and concentrated worship on one god alone, Aten, the solar disk. (This period is known as the Amarna period. It is also famous for the Amarna letters, sent to the pharaoh by his vassals in Canaan, describing conditions there.) Akhenaten declared that all the other gods had failed and ceased to be effective. Aten, identified with Re, the sun-god, had given birth to himself and was beyond compare. He was supreme and all-powerful, the creator and sustainer of the universe. Akhenaten defaced the statue of Amun, sent the high priest of Amun to work in the quarries, and diverted income from the temples of Amun to those of Aten. Scholars dispute whether this cult is properly described as monotheistic. It is not clear that Akhenaten denied the existence of other gods. But it certainly came closer to monotheism than any other cult in the Near

East before the rise of Israel. The reforms were short-lived, however. Akhenaten died in the seventeenth year of his rule. After his death, his successor, Tutankhaten, changed his name to Tutankhamun and moved the royal residence from Amarna to the ancient site of Memphis, south of modern Cairo. Akhenaten's monuments were destroyed or concealed and the royal cult returned to the old ways.

Many scholars have wondered whether the religion of Moses was not in some way influenced by that of Akhenaten. YHWH, the God of Israel, is sometimes described with solar imagery, and Psalm 104 has many parallels to Akhenaten's Hymn to the Sun Disk. But on the whole, there is little similarity between the Egyptian solar god and the God of Israel. The Egyptian deity is a timeless, unchanging divinity. Although Christian theologians may also conceive of God as timeless and unchanging, the biblical God of Israel, YHWH (usually pronounced Yahweh), is bound up with

his people's history from the beginning, and is revealed through that people's history, as well as through nature. The ways in which YHWH was conceived owe much more to the idiom of Mesopotamian and especially Canaanite myths than to Egypt. These myths were written in Semitic languages that were much closer to Hebrew than was Egyptian.

Conclusion

The material reviewed in this chapter is meant to give an impression of the world of the second millennium B.C.E. and the ways in which people imagined gods and goddesses. The Bible claims that Moses received a new revelation, but even a new revelation was of necessity expressed in language and imagery that was already current. The Hebrew language was a Canaanite dialect, and Canaanite was a Semitic language, like Akkadian.



Fig. 1.10 At left, Anubis (with a jackal's head) brings a deceased person to the underworld, where his soul is weighed against a feather, Thoth (with the head of an ibis) recording the results. He is then led by Horus (with a falcon's head) into the presence of the lord of the underworld, Osiris. From a papyrus *Book of the Dead* by the scribe Hunefer; 19th Dynasty; now in the British Museum. Photo by Jon Bodsworth. [Commons.wikimedia.org](https://commons.wikimedia.org)

Israelite religion, too, did not emerge in a vacuum. Its novel aspects came into being as modifications of beliefs and practices that had been current for centuries. The Hebrew language uses the word *El* for God, and the term inevitably carried with it associations of the Canaanite high god. The biblical creation stories draw motifs from the myths of

Atrahasis and *Enuma Elish*, and from the epic of Gilgamesh. In short, much of the language and imagery of the Bible was culture specific, and was deeply imbedded in the traditions of the Near East. Consequently it is necessary to keep the myths and stories of Near Eastern religion in mind when we turn to the biblical text.

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