CHAPTER 1

The Near Eastern Context

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. 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.

The Sumerians developed the earliest known writing system around 3200 B.C.E., a system of wedge-shaped signs, called cuneiform, inscribed on clay tablets. About 2300 B.C.E. the Sumerians were conquered by Sargon of Akkad. His successors ruled for almost 200 years, but the Akkadian language remained the main one for Mesopotamian literature for 2,000 years.

Babylon rose to power under Hammurabi (18th century B.C.E.), who was famous for a code of laws. Babylon only became dominant again a thousand years later, under Nebuchadnezzar, the conqueror of Jerusalem in the early 6th century B.C.E.

Assyria attained its greatest power 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 appears around 3100 B.C.E. 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. The New Kingdom followed. Egypt ruled

Map 1.1 **The Ancient Near East; the shaded area marks the "Fertile Crescent."**

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 is therefore 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 (the Amarna letters) that give information about the state of affairs in Canaan. 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.

Canaan lay between Egypt and Mesopotamia; it comprised modern Palestine/Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, and part of Syria. It was a loose configuration of city-states. Later, in the first millennium, the Canaanites in the coastal

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 Nebuchadnezzar	1540–1069 B.C.E. New Kingdom Ca. 1350 B.C.E. Amarna Period Akhenaten 1279–1213 B.C.E. Reign of Ramesses II

cities of Tyre, Sidon, and Byblos were known as Phoenicians. The biblical texts sometimes use the designation "Amorite" as a variant for "Canaanite."

From the twelfth century on, the people of northern Syria were called Arameans. These were not a unified people but included several small kingdoms.

The Philistines were sea people who came to Canaan from the Aegean. Their origin remains obscure. They were defeated by Egypt about 1190 B.C.E., but they then settled in the coastal towns of Palestine, including Ashkelon, Gaza, and Ashdod. The history of the Philistines parallels that of Israel to a great degree.

The Modern Rediscovery of the Ancient Near East

The modern recovery of the ancient Near East began with Napoleon's expedition to Egypt in 1798–1802, and the discovery of the Rosetta Stone. Since the same text was written in both Greek and Egyptian, it became possible in 1822 to decipher hieroglyphics for the first time.

The first explorations of Assyrian sites (Nineveh, Khorsabad) were carried out in the 1840s. The key to the decipherment of Akkadian was provided by an inscription by a Persian king Darius on the rock of Behistun in Persia, in Old Persian, Elamite, and Akkadian. 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, among them: the Amarna letters, noted above, discovered in 1887; the Ugaritic tablets (fourteenth century B.C.E.), found on the Mediterranean coast in northern Syria in 1929; the Mari tablets (mostly from the eighteenth century B.C.E.), at Mari on the Euphrates, beginning in 1933; the Ebla tablets (third millennium B.C.E.), from Tell Mardikh, near Aleppo in northwestern Syria, discovered beginning in 1964; and tablets from Emar (modern Meskene, in Syria), uncovered in the mid-1970s.

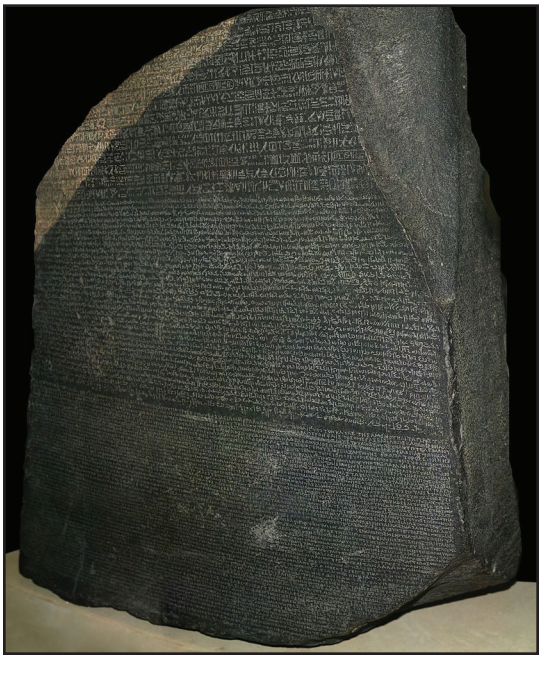

Fig. 1.1 **The Rosetta Stone; British Museum.**
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Aspects of Near Eastern Religion

The worship of gods and goddesses was a significant part of life in the ancient Near East. Religion was not standardized and systematized. Each city-state had its own cult of its chief god or goddess.

There was, however, 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 some works (e.g., the Epic of Gilgamesh) could be found at widely different locations at diverse dates. Modern scholars often refer to such texts as "canonical," but it is important to bear in mind that the "canon" or standard that they established

was literary and that it did not involve orthodoxy in religious belief.

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 stories 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. Two Akkadian creation myths stand out, because of their length and wide distribution. These are the myth of Atrahasis and *Enuma Elish.*

Atrahasis

Atrahasis is most fully preserved in an Old Babylonian version from about 1700 B.C.E. It 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." When the gods cast lots and divided the world, Anu took the sky, Enlil the earth, and Enki the waters below the earth. 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 to the creation of humanity by Enki and the mother goddess, "to bear the load of the gods." They slaughtered "a god who had intelligence" and mixed clay with his flesh and blood. After six hundred years the people became too numerous, and a plague was sent to reduce humanity. At this point, Atrahasis ("the very wise") emerged, and averted the plague by the advice of Enki. 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. 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." 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.

The gods are anthropomorphic, conceived and portrayed in the likeness of human beings. 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 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.

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.), when Marduk became the chief god of Babylon. It 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.

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

The *Enuma Elish* begins at an earlier point in primordial time than does the Atrahasis story. In the beginning, there was only the primordial pair, Apsu and Tiamat. The *theogony* (begetting of the gods) comes 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 proposes that the young gods be eliminated. The young gods, however, learn of the plot because of the wisdom of Ea. Ea then devises a spell, puts Apsu to sleep, and slays him. He sets up his dwelling on top of Apsu. There he begets new gods, Bel and Marduk. Tiamat then prepares for battle. Ea urges Marduk to come forward. Marduk agrees to fight Tiamat on condition that his word should be law. The gods accept and proclaim him king.

Marduk then defeats Tiamat in battle. He cuts the corpse of Tiamat in two, puts up half of it to make the sky and arranges her waters so that they can not escape. He then proceeds to establish the constellations of the stars as stations for the gods. He has Ea create humankind, from the blood of Qingu, an ally of Tiamat, to do the work of the gods. Finally he gives the command to create Babylon. The gods labor for a year to construct Babylon and the temple Esagila. On its completion, Marduk invites 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. 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 Epic of Gilgamesh

The Epic of Gilgamesh is one of the most remarkable works that have come down to us from antiquity. 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. Gilgamesh was regarded in antiquity as a historical character. He may have lived in the third millennium.

According to the epic, Gilgamesh, king of Uruk, was two-thirds divine and one-third mortal. 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, but was tamed by a harlot. She tells him, after sex, that he is wise and has become like a god. 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.

Fig. 1.2 A horned figure (Enkidu?) fights a lion. Cylinder seal impression from ancient Babylon. Commons.wikimedia.org

Together, Gilgamesh and Enkidu undertake great adventures. 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 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. When Enkidu dies, Gilgamesh mourns bitterly: "Shall I die too? Am I not like Enkidu?" 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 . . .

> This is the work [of the living].
> (Old Babylonian Version; Dalley, *Myths*, 150).

She directs him to Urshanabi, boatman of Utnapishtim. Gilgamesh prevails on the boatman to ferry him over to Utnapishtim, who tells him the story of the flood. Before Gilgamesh sets out on his return journey, Utnapishtim tells him about a plant 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 draws attention to an aspect of Near Eastern religion that contrasts with the Hebrew Bible. Goddesses figure in the stories beside the gods. In general, goddesses declined in importance in the second millennium. One goddess who did not decline was Ishtar, who was associated with fertility in all its aspects. She is the goddess of thunderstorms and rain; she is also the goddess of 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).

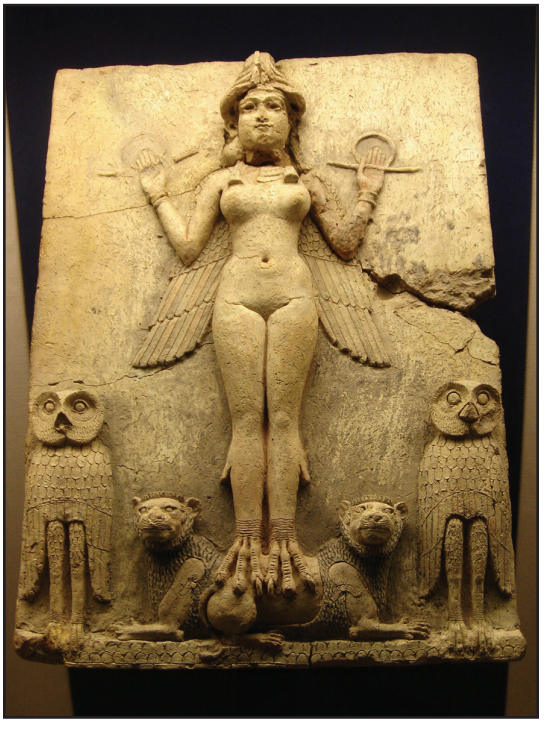

Fig. 1.3 Babylonian relief, nineteenth or eighteenth century B.C.E., of a winged and eagle-footed goddess (Ishtar?); known as the "Queen of the Night"; now in the British Museum. Commons.wikimedia.org

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. 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. 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. 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 ends in the establishment of a king (in this case, Baal). The Ugaritic text does not discuss the creation of the world, but 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, and smashes Sea on the skull and kills him. 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 (Isa 27:1; Job 3:8; 41:1; Pss 74:13-14; 104:26).

Fig. 1.4 Figurine of a warrior god (Baal?) 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

A second episode of the myth begins with the construction of Baal's house and a celebratory banquet. The third episode presents a more serious challenge to Baal, on the part of Mot, or Death. Baal is terrified, and declares that he is Mot's servant forever. The story vividly describes how Death swallows Baal. Eventually, Baal is rescued by his sister Anat, who splits Death with a sword. 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.

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

While the Baal cycle has much in common with *Enuma Elish,* it does not seem to have the same political implications. Rather, it seems to reflect the seasonal changes, at least in the struggle of Baal and Mot. When Baal dies, there is no rain, and the fields are dry. When he comes back to life, the rain comes again. This story is not concerned with morality. 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. 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

Fig. 1.5 Bronze female figurine: Anat? From Syria, second millennium B.C.E. Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore.
Commons.wikimedia.org

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. He is given a son named Aqhat, who has a wonderful bow that attracts the attention of the goddess Anat. She offers Aqhat gold and silver for the bow and, when he refuses, she offers him immortality. Aqhat refuses to believe that this is possible and goes on to insult Anat, who has him killed in revenge by a vulture. Danel then puts a curse on nature. Aqhat's sister Paqhat sets out to avenge him, but the end of the story is lost.

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. The Old Kingdom, in the second half of the third millennium B.C.E., had its capital at Memphis. The preeminent god was the creator-god Ptah. The priests 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 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 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 myths than to the Egyptian.

The Egyptian creation stories place less emphasis on conflict than *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. The pharaoh was regarded as the living Horus and after death 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 museums were discovered in tombs, where

they had been buried as provisions for 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 is 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 may be relevant to the development of monotheism in Israel. This was the religious reform of Pharaoh Amenophis IV, also known as Akhenaten (ca. 1350 B.C.E.). This pharaoh broke with the traditional cult of Amun at Thebes. He moved his capital to Amarna or Akhetaten, farther 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 focused all worship on Aten, identified with Re, the sun-god, who had given birth to himself and was beyond compare. He was supreme and all-powerful, the creator and sustainer of the universe. 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. 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.

Fig. 1.6 Akhenaten worships the solar disk; painted relief from Amarna. Commons.wikimedia.org

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 were already current. The Hebrew language was a Canaanite dialect, and Canaanite was a Semitic language, like Akkadian. 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.

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