Englund, notes on Mesopotamian religion, M104 S2016

RELIGION IN MESOPOTAMIA

Like much else, the development of religion from totemic animalism to monotheism is better documented in Mesopotamia than elsewhere. Any people will try to fill the gaps in their knowledge of the natural world. Storytellers from the Yakima tribe explained the volcanoes in Washington state and Oregon, including the following story:

> *Two tribes lived across the river from one another. Because they were friendly and peaceful tribes, the Great Spirit built a bridge across the river for them. Eventually, however, the tribes began to quarrel. The Great Spirit became angry. To punish the tribes he took away fire. The tribes prayed to the Great Spirit to return fire to them. Finally, the Great Spirit agreed. To restore fire, the Great Spirit had to go to an old woman named Loo-Wit who, because of her goodness, still had fire. Loo-Wit promised the Great Spirit that she would share her fire with the two tribes if the Great Spirit would make her eternally young and beautiful. Fire was restored, and the tribes were peaceful for a short time. The chiefs of both of the tribes, however, fell in love with the beautiful Loo-Wit. The chiefs began to quarrel and went to war. Once again, the Great Spirit became angry and in retaliation he turned the two chiefs into mountains. One became Mount Hood and one became Mount Adams. Because Loo-Wit was so beautiful, the Great Spirit made her into Mount St. Helens––that way she could remain beautiful forever. [until the great explosion of May 1980] [teleology: similarly, the snake steals Gilgamesh's plant of life, thereby sluffing skin and growing young]*

What is religion?

There is a positivist, a philosophical, an ethical-moral, and even a clinical or psychoanalytical response to this question. As you know, the US is currently in the midst of a debate of the role of religion, specifically the relationship between religiosity and state institutions, including most importantly our public schools. This debate alone marks this nation as one of, if not *the most fundamentalist country on earth*. An evangelical Christian with a literalist view of the Bible will answer our question in a fashion quite different than might be the case with a physicist at UCLA, or an atheist in Elk Grove south of Sacramento who nearly single-handedly is opposing reference to religious belief in public schools. Amongst sociologists, the question of faith often devolves to one of social health, namely that regardless of the ultimate truth of religious beliefs, faith results in the amassing of "social capital," Pippa Norris (Harvard) and Ronald Inglehart (U Michigan) have said in their book *Sacred and Secular* (Cambridge University Press 2004), "By providing community meeting places, linking

neighbors together, and fostering altruism, in many (but not all) faiths, religious institutions seem to bolster the ties of belonging to civic life."

You have read the introduction to Bottero, who speaks of a human response to the sacred, divine, the numinous, without which religion has no reason for being.

Without weighing in on the likelihood that the beliefs of one group or the other might literally correspond to the truth, the study of religion can proceed by simply considering the social contract among members of some community that is based in part on shared beliefs; it can follow the historical development of belief systems; it can describe the behavior of individuals and groups who consider themselves engaged in religious activity, and so on. We should remember that the initial spark of interest in Mesopotamian antiquities resulted less from an intellectual curiosity about the lives, ideas and actions of a very ancient society, but rather more from the fervor of scholars educated in theological seminaries in Europe and the United States. And it was not just confirmation of much of the historical reporting from the Old Testament that with excavations of the Assyrian capitals lit up debates about the historicity of the Bible. The reaction to George Smith's discovery and translation of the flood story from the Gilgamesh epic was almost feverish in the West, for this story transported 19th century society into an age that until then had been shrouded in Judeo-Christian scripture.

But Babylonian discoveries were being reported in journals and newspapers and at learned societies during the same period when ethnographic studies were producing more and more documentation of the great breadth and variety of religious experience in the world. Add to that the positivist movement that derived from Charles Darwin's 1859 publication of *The Origin of Species*, but really goes back to the writings of the Frenchman Auguste Comte, who described the "law of three phases," namely, that society has gone through phases he called theological, metaphysical, and scientific. The last of these he also called "Positive". His law of three stages represents one of the first theories of social evolutionism: that human development (social progress) progresses from the theological stage, in which nature was mythically conceived and man sought the explanation of natural phenomena from supernatural beings, through the metaphysical stage in which nature was conceived of as a result of obscure forces and man sought the explanation of natural phenomena from them until the final positive stage in which all abstract and obscure forces are discarded, and natural phenomena are explained by their constant relationship (cf. the wiki entry <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Auguste_Comte>). This is also the basis of much of the writings of Karl Marx and other empirical materialists of the 19th century who see in "altruism"

a natural alternative to religious morality, leading to the moral obligations of individuals to serve others and place the interests of others above their own. Such social evolutionists opposed the idea of individual rights, and by extension the economic developments of industrialist capitalism that had so ravaged the lower classes of Europe in the mid-19th century, maintaining that they were not consistent with this supposed ethical obligation. We should note also the great impact on religious studies that has been felt from the teachings of Freud. For the Viennese psychiatrist, Western religions derive from patriarchal societies that require, explicitly or subliminally, the submission to a Father-God, and therefore ultimately from the Oedipal complex that pits the father against the son as natural competitors for the wife/mother's emotional and sexual favors. He went from a categorical rejection of religion as an illusion, to, in *Moses and Monotheism*, a fascination with the truth of monotheism that exists only with the unconscious. Freud understood religion in general as a useful neurotic and even psychotic symptom (Marx: *Religion* is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It *is the opium of the people*). Religion is a defense, a response to the experience of utter helplessness or dependency ["utter dependency" of Schleiermacher]. It is an infantile fantasy that makes life tolerable despite the hardships, and it even negates death as the final end of human life. Though many of Freud's teachings are now dismissed as untestable (like those of intelleigent design), still psychoanalysis—like Piagetian child psychology—has had a powerful impact on religious studies.

Following the onslaught of scientific progress, pre-scientific religious writings have been adjusted in most religious communities to adapt to new levels of understanding of natural phenomena. Since the advent of the scientific age, European theologians have backtracked from much of the earlier tradition of literalist commentary on the Bible and have instead reinterpreted Biblical accounts as symbolic or metaphorical truths, or rather in recent decades evangelical Christians have challenged scientific theory with such constructs as creationism and now "intelligent design", while many, in particular in the US, have remained wedded to a strictly literalist view of Christian scripture. Thus so-called "Bible belt" Christians have much in common with Islamist fundamentalists in the Muslim world, though as members of a great world power until 2009 even represented in the White House they have not resorted to the insurgent tactics that characterize much of Muslim radicalism.

[see the class Powerpoint for slides corresponding to the following bullet points]

Prehistory

This is not a class on Mesopotamian religion, but much of the intellectual history of Babylonia runs through the literature wholly or in part influenced by ancient cult and ritual. Let us view

the development of religious communities in Mesopotamia, and whether Babylonian evidence assists religious phenomenologists in constructing an evolutionary chain from pre-scientific communities to modern religions and to political and social philosophy. Much of Mesopotamian prehistory is very difficult to understand. Common were "mother goddesses" that are usually interpreted to represent fertility cults of a possibly matriarchic society. Thousands of eye idols were found in Syian Tell Brak, among many other variants of ancestor worship and animistic worship akin to that of many early Native American tribes. And based on the traits assigned pantheons of later Sumerian and Akkadian tradition, the pre- and proto-historic inhabitants of Mesopotamia worshipped the heavenly bodies and the natural earthly forces whose existence and power they could not explain. Thus as in other pre-scientific cultures, the early Babylonians worshipped the sun, the moon, the planets, and the stars and galaxies; they worshipped and gave human traits to the storms, the waterways and the plagues that threatened them.

Uruk vase, Inanna

Based on the strength of ancestor worship documented by the practice of intramural burial and family cult, it would be natural to expect that some form of anthropomorphic deities should have been worshipped in the first historical period, Late Uruk. But despite some slight evidence from cylinder seals and from the the Uruk vase (headdress of presumed "Inanna" was broken in antiquity, so we cannot know whether there is some indication of divinity such as the horned crown of all later tradition),

Late Uruk standards

all textual evidence suggests that communities formed around extended families or tribes represented by standards of the sort seen here, including the natural symbol of later Inanna, the reed bundle.

Hairy triangles

Even the proto-Elamite texts of Jemdet Nasr period Persia suggest that the great households we customarily connect to temple complexes were represented by such flags or standards that would have stood before these households. These icons were incorporated into what were cylinder seal motifs of evidently high-rank individuals in Susa. The inscribed signs may have represented "tribes" devoted to a long-dead ancestor.

The Sumerian pantheon

To judge from our texts, a radical development in the religion of Mesopotamia took place at

the inception of the Early Dynastic period. In ED I texts from Ur, we find for the first time personal names borne by Sumerians that indicated devotion to their gods. These gods and goddesses were doubtless honored in various settlements, with particular divinities attached to particular cities through traditions now lost to us. Thus the chief early city Uruk became known as the cult center of the heaven god An and the goddess of Venus, Inanna; Nippur the cult center of Enlil, the son of An and chief executive power of the pantheon; a second son Enki was the god of wisdom in southern Eridu; the moon god Nanna in Ur, sun Utu in Sippar and Larsa. A lesser god Asarluhi, Akkadian Marduk, was in Babylon.

We see a unifying effect of this pantheon. These divine beings, themselves attached to heavenly bodies and natural forces, were by the Fara period in theological centers of Mesopotamia organized in very large divine households, with divine managers, messengers, workers and so on, all composed into a list of many hundreds of lines that had by the ED IIIa period achieved standardized form called An = Anum. We must assume that this was a top-to-bottom development, with some few members of a priestly class assigning such and such divinities to alluvial cities, thereby by a process called syncretism combining the elements of locally worshipped gods with those of gods in the cults from Nippur, Uruk, Ur and Eridu.

Temple architecture

This priestly class had early on formed a socio-political and economic elite in Babylonia, best demonstrated by the construction of the most imposing buildings of the early periods–temples in Eridu from the earliest levels of settlement one on top of the other ever larger into the historical periods, in Uruk 60 meters long and 25 wide, in Old Babylonian Harmal 20 feet high, dominating the city borough.

Temple oval

One of the best know temple complexes is that of Khafajeh in the Diyala region, an oval temple ca. 2500 BC. Another is the temple called e2-ninnu in Girsu, the construction of which is described in numerous inscriptions by Gudea.

He purified the holy city and encircled it with fires. He collected clay in a very pure place; in a pure place he made with it the brick and put the brick into the mold. He followed the rites in all their splendor; he purified the foundations of the temple, surrounded it with fires, anointed the platform with an aromatic balm. When this was done, craftsmen were brought from afar: From Elam came the Elamites, from Susa the Susians, Magan and Meluhha collected timber from their mountains, and Gudea brought them together in his town Girsu. Gudea, the great en-priest of Ningirsu, made

a path into the Cedar mountains which nobody had entered before; he cut its cedars with great axes. Like giant snakes, cedars were floating down the water (of the river). In the quarries which nobody had entered before, Gudea, the great priest of Ningirsu, made a path and then the stones were delivered in large blocks. Many other precious metals were carried to the ensi. From Copper mountain of Kimash, its mountains as dust. For Gudea, they mined silver from its mountains, delivered red stone from Meluhha in great amounts. Finally the construction work proper began, and within one year the sanctuary was completed, beautifully appointed and ready for the god's ceremonial entry.

Temple statues

Once the temples were complete, statues of the gods were placed in holy rooms hidden from general view. Town fathers had sculpted statues of them selves to be placed by temple personnel before the statues of the gods, to act as dutiful supplicants to the gods, praying for favorable treatment, for a propitious destiny, for health and prosperity. The large eyes of these Early Dynastic statues undoubtedly represented the awe with which the supplicants honored their gods, and may have fulfilled the same function as the prehistoric eye idols from Tell Brak.

Gudea statue

Statues of the rulers, also certainly placed in temples, fulfilled a similar function, but may themselves have been venerated by temple personnel. The hand gesture here of Gudea is one of respect for the god Ningirsu; a similar sign of greeting is the hand held before the nose—its Sumerian designation is literally "hand-to-nose"—which represented the nose held down to the earth.

The institutions of these Sumerian temples we have studied before the midterm. They were very large economic households, prior to the Old Akkadian period the principal landowners of the cities they dominated visually and economically. They probably controlled the majority of laborers of these cities.

Deification of human (rulers)

First attested Naram-Sin ca. 2300 BC, thereafter the rule. Utnapishtim/Ziusudra was also divinized king, as was Gilgamesh after his rule in Uruk ca. 2700 BC and listed in Fara god list, so the idea was not new, simply pushed into the living period of the rulers.

Seals

Once an anthropomorphized polytheism was stabilized by a co-ruling theocracy, human

interaction with the divine was evidently common among all classes of Babylonians. Innumerable public and private prayers are attested in the texts, pleading for success in campagns to assistance for a man seeking the favor of a young woman. Such intercessions on the part of men were common in cylinder seal motifs, best known the presentation scene from the Old Akkadian period on, in which the personal god of some human presents his case to a god of higher status, often the sun god Shamash (e.g. also the scene of the Codex Hammurapi). Incantations exhort Marduk to intercede to save the life of ill patients, to ward off the bite of a dog or the sting of a scorpion, and to defend against the demon Lamashtu (later lilitu?) who keeps a baby crying in the night. The gods were believed to speak directly to men in the form of omens, whose meaning was divined by a special class of trained priests. Omens took the form of features on goat livers, of smoke rising from a specially prepared fire, of deformed fetuses, of astral configurations, and so on. All were believed, very likely by the great majority of the population, to forcast the future.

A student in this class asked me my opinion of the likelihood that commoners participated in official cult. One of the best tools to study this problem is in fact the use of pantheon names in personal names attached to Babylonians from all walks of life, from rulers to slaves. Such names take the form of "Naram-Sin," "Beloved of the moon god Sin", Amar-Suen, "Calf of the moon god", and Sin-eribam, "Sin replaced (the dead son) for me," just to name a few examples. This is indeed a promising avenue to correct the impression left by many specialists that we can say relatively little about the beliefs of the common man. Quite a number of prosopographies are now available for various historical periods, but a statistical analysis of such names will only be possible with the advent of new data sets that digital library projects such as CDLI are currently preparing and disseminating online.

DEATH

Royal tombs of Ur, ca. 2600 BC

Clearly one of the major tenets of Babylonian religion was the belief in an afterlife. Funerary practice with the inclusion in tombs of articles of daily life, including food and drink, and of social status (cylinder seals etc.), suggests that this belief went back well into the prehistoric period. There is quite of a lot of cuneiform literature dedicated to the topic of death, including dreams etc. The best known source of Sumerian conception of death is the story of Enkidu and the Netherworld, according to which Gilgamesh's companion enters the realm of the dead—under ground—to retrieve game pieces lost by Gilgamesh. He is held captive there (the netherworld is called "the land of no return"), but allowed to visit Gilgamesh, probably as a spirit. Enkidu recounts the fate of various dead persons, beginning with those who had one,

two and up to seven children (seven sons: “As a companion of the gods, he sits on a throne and listens to judgments”), with ever increasing status in the netherworld. Then the text describes others who died in a fire (they are mere smoke) or were partially devoured by a lion.

Enkidu’s answers to Gilgamesh
“Did you see him who was eaten by a lion?”
“*He cries bitterly “O my hands! O my legs!” ”*
“Did you see the leprous man?”
“*He twitches like an ox as the worms eat at him.”*
“Did you see him who fell in battle?”
“*His father and mother are not there to hold his head, and his wife weeps.”*
“Did you see the spirit of him who has no funerary offerings?”
“*He eats the scraps and the crumbs ..... tossed out in the street.”*
“Did you see my little stillborn children who never knew existence?” “I saw them.” “How do they fare?”
"They play at a table of gold and silver, laden with honey and butter oil.”
“Did you see him who was set on fire?”
“*I did not see him. His spirit is not about. His smoke went up to the sky.”*

One major point of the Gilgamesh epic seems to be to offer some comfort to those facing death.

Before his journey to Utnapishtim, Siduri the barmaid tells Gilgamesh: "You will never find that life for which you are looking. When the gods created man they allotted to him death, but life they retained in their own keeping. As for you, Gilgamesh, ... dance and be merry, feast and rejoice. Let your clothes be fresh, bathe yourself in water, cherish the little child that holds your hand."

Assyrian tree of life
And the move toward monotheism in Babylonia.
The flood story of the Gilgamesh epic demonstrated a close relationship between Babylonian theology and that of ancient Israel. Certainly contact was very real between the two centers during most of the neo-Assyrian period, and of course during the Babylonian captivity by Nebuchadnezzar of the inhabitants of the Kingdom of Judah. The true impact of these contacts, around the time of the editing of the Torah and the canonization of the Bible, is still debated (see Bottero chapter 7 in your readings). Although generally described as a polytheistic

system, Mesopotamian religion demonstrates a clear tendency toward monotheism, as historically toward a centralized power in a head of state. Syncretistic theology of the 3rd millennium had already begun this process, subsuming in one god the characteristics of many, and then the divinization of a central human figure in the Old Akkadian period, but the most forceful example of this development is found in the Babylonian Creation epic *enuma elish*. In this myth, the major gods elect Marduk to battle the ancient mother goddess, the great sea Tiamat, electing him to chief executive power much as Jacobsen has written that the role of the monarch evolved in the ED period. This elevation of Marduk was contrary to the theology of Nippur, seat of the Sumerian chief executive Enlil, but went further by reciting the fifty names of Marduk, each representing divine aspects of members of the Babylonian pantheon.

This unification in one god of the divine aspects of many reaches its culmination in the Assyrian national god Assur, who in fact in an Assyrian version of the Creation Epic replaces Marduk. Assur as a composite godhead with nationalistic and ethnic ambitions most closely resembles Yahweh of the Old Testament. Simo Parpola of Helsinki University has interpreted the Assyrian tree of life in the slide here as a mystic representation of a unified godhead that was part of a neo-Assyrian cult that led to many elements of the medieval Jewish Kabbalah, and of other forms of Jewish mysticism. Parpola has gone so far as to contend that Assyrian religion led through Judaism into Christianity, finding in it the concept of a messianic figure or “savior god.”