Religion, Ritual, Myth: Bible and Ancient Near East

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From last time
- Religion of the Bible: Some Major Themes
- Religion of Israel: Women as a point of departure

For today
- Continuities and discontinuities between “religion of Israel” and other local religious practices
- “Religion of the Bible” and mythology of the Ancient Near East

Religion of the Bible: Some Major Themes

- **Acts:** Sacrifice or other dedication, donation of property. Donors may be pilgrims (Unleavened Bread, Firstfruits/Weeks [Shavuot], Sukkot/Tabernacles).
- **Persons:** Priests assigned the role of performing, mediating sacrifices; divination.
- **Locations:** Sacred locations; may involve pilgrimage. For much of the Bible, only one sacrificial place, Jerusalem Temple (e.g., Deut 16 in handout).
- **Stories:** In particular the Exodus is the central story, especially in Torah. Exodus and law-giving at Horeb/Sinai are central to Biblical/Jewish notion of covenant. (Note: agricultural festivals—become commemorations of the Exodus).
- **Time:** Performance of acts in their appointed times. But time can be relative (e.g., at/after harvest) or fixed (15th day of 7th month).

Religion of Ancient Israel: Women as a Point of Departure

- Religion of the Bible is exclusive—male priests preside—and focuses on male heads of household.
- Women are markers of “improper” (offering cakes to the Queen of Heaven) or “unofficial” (e.g., virgins bewailing the fate of Jephthah’s daughters) religion.
- Interact with sacred places, personalities in cases generally relating to (infertility)
- Suggests: a range of practices, concerns, outside the specific interest of Biblical law or narrative.
  (E.g., We know that people married, and how it was conceived as a matter of households and property, but not how/whether it was celebrated.)
“Religion of Israel” and local religion: continuities and discontinuities

- “High Places” and cultic tradition
- Mythology: cosmic battle at creation (more later)
- Discontinuities?

“High Places” and cultic tradition

- High places (bamot), aniconic standing stones (matsevot), trees (a/Asherot) a regular feature of regional cult
- Also feature stories of patriarchs (but “trees” not asherot): a part of the cultural legacy
- Kuntillet Ajrud: YHWH and his a/Asherah—possibly not consort of YHWH

Drawings, inscriptions from Kuntillet Ajrud, 8th C. BCE
Discontinuities?
- A national myth, attached to an ancestral God: Moabites (Mesha stone) and Israelites use similar descriptions of their Gods to emphasize difference.
- Some practices (circumcision) mark difference with Philistines in particular.

“Religion of the Bible” and mythology of the Ancient Near East
- Flood narratives: Genesis 6-8 and the Gilgamesh epic
- Genesis 1 and a de-mythologized creation (cf. Enuma Elish)
- Biblical myths of cosmic battle at creation, and their near-eastern context.

Flood narratives: Genesis 6-8 and the Gilgamesh epic
- Further discussion in section
- Common features:
  - Dove, Raven to test the receding waters
  - Sacrifice
  - Odor of the sacrifice appeasing
- But also differences
  - Moral tenor of the genesis account
  - Conflict of the Gods vs. disobedience toward the one creator God.
Genesis 1 and a de-mythologized creation

- Genesis 1: orderly, logical creation, progressing from darkness and watery deep (tehom)
- But Enuma Elish:
  "Having defeated Tiamat (Tehom, Marduk) gazed at the huge body, pondering how to use it, what to create from the dead carcass. He split it apart like a cockle-shell; with the upper half he constructed the arc of sky, he pulled down the bar and set a watch on the waters, so they should never escape." (Cf. Day 2 of creation)
- In what follows, Marduk creates the rest of the world from Tiamat’s carcass
- Genesis 1 possibly an active rejection of a mythology it knows and understands

Biblical myths of cosmic battle at creation

- Enuma Elish
- Ugarit (Ras Shamra), examples of 13th C-12thC Canaanite versions of a cosmic battle over chaos, with Ba’al the great champion
- Assigned for class: Is 51, Ps 74, Ps 89 include examples of this motif
- Significance: Genesis 1 ("P") suppresses not only "gentile" mythology, but also Israelite mythology

YHWH as conqueror

Ps. 85 (RSV):

1 Let the heavens praise thy wonders, O LORD, thy faithfulness in the assembly of the holy ones! 6 For who in the skies can be compared to the LORD? Who among the heavenly beings is like the LORD, 7 a God feared in the council of the holy ones, great and terrible above all that are round about him? 8 O LORD God of hosts, who is mighty as thou art, O LORD, with thy faithfulness round about thee? 9 Thou dost rule the raging of the sea; when its waves rise, thou stillest them. 10 Thou didst crush Rahab like a carcass, thou didst scatter thy enemies with thy mighty arm. 11 The heavens are thine, the earth also is thine; the world and all that is in it, thou hast founded them. 12 The north and the south, thou hast created them; Tabor and Hermon joyously praise thy name.