

God as father in the Bible and the father image in several contemporary ancient Near Eastern myths: A comparison

If, as has been argued, myths like Dreams are 'symbolic of the dynamics of the psyche,'¹ and 'modal familial experiences . . . play an important part in shaping the fantasy products' of a culture,² it would appear that the peoples of the ancient Near East during the second millennium B.C.E. were experiencing a fathering crisis of sorts. In many of their myths, in any case, fathers present problems. Their marginality, cruelty, incompetence, or powerlessness, more often than not, pose dilemmas to which mother, son or daughter deities must respond either by defending themselves or by taking action to uphold the universe in their stead.³ *Only in biblical myth, it seems, is there a divine father who is a major force for good in the life of the world.* This raises the question whether biblical faith in God as father, often said to reflect an already established patriarchal order, may not instead have arisen on the wings of an emotional revolution.⁴

My purpose in this essay is not, however, primarily to search out how or why this happened, but simply to highlight a few of the more important comparisons and contrasts that can be drawn when looking at the portrait of God as father in the Bible against the backdrop of divine father images in several contemporary myths of the ancient Near East. Three mythologies in particular outside the Bible stand out as characteristic of religious imagination in that region during this period: the Babylonian creation story, *Enuma Elis*, the Canaanite Baal poems from Ugarit, and the Egyptian tale of Osiris and Isis. After reviewing each of these briefly, I will turn to the biblical myth and then conclude with a few thoughts regarding the significance of the comparisons that emerge.

- 1 Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Bollingen Series, 17 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949), 19.
- 2 Philip Slater, *The Glory of Hera: Greek Mythology and the Greek Family* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), xvi.
- 3 According to E. O. James, *The Worship of the Sky-God: A Comparative Study in Semitic and Indo-European Religion* (London: Athlone Press, 1963), 8, father deities tend to be *Dei otiosi* and marginal to the cult 'everywhere in primitive states of culture both in the present and the past.'
- 4 My thesis is thus almost the opposite of the one put forward by Naomi Goldenberg in *Changing of the Gods: Feminism and the End of Traditional Religions* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), 37, who writes that 'all recorded history has been patriarchal' and that for the first time today (in the wake of the feminist movement) we are about to see 'what happens when father-gods die for an entire culture . . .' The truth is (as I will try to show) that father gods were far from alive and well even in antiquity (also see James, *Worship of the Sky-God*).

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Enuma Elis

Religion in Mesopotamia of the second millennium B.C.E. was characterized by a large number of nature deities thought to be organized into a divine state. They are also represented in the myths as a divine family, the dynamics of which are most fully revealed in the Babylonian creation story, *Enuma Elis*.⁵

Two crises marked the coming into being of the world as we know it, according to this myth, both precipitated in part by conduct attributed to fathers. At the beginning of creation, the *Enuma Elis* tells us, there existed only co-mingling salt and fresh waters conceived of as two parental deities: Tiamat, the mother, and Apsu, the father (I, 1-5). In their midst the younger gods were born: Lahmu and Lahamu, Anshar, and Kishar (silt-gods), Anu (the sky-god), and the earth-god Nudimmud or Ea (I, 6-20). The birth of these children, however, brought little joy to their parents, for they were boisterous and loud and disturbed their sleep, so much so that something had to be done. And it was father Apsu, we are told, who hit upon a bold idea. The children should be killed (I, 20-40)! Mother Tiamat, however, upon hearing of this solution, was, to say the least, less than enthusiastic and pleaded with her husband to have patience (I, 40-43). Father Apsu was in no mood to be dissuaded. His face 'radiant' (the text says), he set about executing his murderous plan. But before he could accomplish it, word of his intentions was leaked to his son Ea, who promptly cast a spell over him, putting him to sleep (I, 64). He then proceeded to divest his father of the emblems of his authority (band, tiara, halo), bound him, and murdered him (I, 69), after which he built himself a chamber in the midst of the corpse (I, 71-77). With this the curtain is drawn on Act I of the *Enuma Elis*.

Needless to say, the drama to this point has portrayed a family in considerable disarray. The father especially is characterized as a brutish figure at odds with his wife and irritated by his children to the point of wanting to kill them. The children survive by murdering him instead. Thus were the foundations laid for our cosmic home!

A second chapter in the drama of creation begins when Ea, fresh from murdering his father, marries and has a son of his own, the storm-god Marduk (I, 79-84). With Marduk's entry into the story a contest begins to take shape between two groups of gods—those in league with mother Tiamat, now a widow, and those associated with the younger generation of gods under the leadership of sky-god Anshar. Mother Tiamat, it turns out, in the aftermath of her husband's death was persuaded to do what she had earlier pleaded with him not to do: murder her children (I, 111-17). With this in mind, she began fashioning an army of monsters and elevated one of them, Kingu, as commander in chief (I, 125-61).

The crisis that now unfolds is portrayed in the myth as the most severe in the entire history of cosmogenesis (II, 1-48). Who is going to stop mother Tiamat from attacking and destroying her own children and with them the

5 In the analysis that follows references are to the translation of this myth by E. A. Speiser in James Pritchard (ed.), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), 60-72.

world-home they have succeeded in creating for themselves? The sky-god Anshar, himself now an exalted father deity (Apsu being dead), would appear to be the logical candidate. But Anshar, we are told, upon hearing of the frightful things mother Tiamat was planning to do, shrank back in fear (II, 50) and turned for assistance to two father deities next in rank, Anu and Ea. But they too were as fearful as he (II, 53-87). Collectively helpless, the divine elders summoned an assembly of the gods and there it was that the solution to this crisis was arrived at (II, 88-99). What the fathers were too frightened to do, individually or collectively, was laid on the shoulders of the youthful Marduk and he responded magnificently, it is said, but only after shrewdly exacting a pledge that he would reign as king of the universe in his father's place (II, 122-29). Then without anyone's help he faced the terrible Tiamat, distended and destroyed her and fashioned the universe out of the remains of her body (IV, 90-145). The myth closes with Marduk completing creation (V-VI, 44) and being given a temple at which were recited his fifty glorious names (VI, 45-VII, 144).

It is not fathers, then, who rule the universe in the Babylonian vision of reality, but sons, and they rule not with them, but in spite of them. Fathers, it is implied, can be cruel and weak. Sons must defend themselves against them and rise above them. Mothers also can be harsh and destructive and bring terror to both fathers and sons. Then, too, sons must be resourceful and courageous and not expect their fathers to help them. *From this myth we might conjecture that Mesopotamian society was characterized by ambitious, bellicose sons and weak fathers*, a configuration, interestingly enough, that recurs in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, a popular Mesopotamian narrative roughly contemporary in time with the *Enuma Elis*. In it we read of the journey to maturity of a famous king. His growing up, it turns out, was exceptionally long and tortuous for the very reason that in his case, too, the fathers were frightened and weak and unable to discipline or guide him, so that he had to find his way pretty much on his own, through trial and error, except for the help of a peer.⁶

The Baal myths

Our picture of second-millennium Canaanite mythology has been significantly enhanced through the discovery of tablets in the library of the chief priest of the storm-god Baal in the ancient city of Ugarit, among which are several that relate Baal's ascent to divine kingship.⁷ Baal's father El is creator and titular ruler of the universe. *In reality, like the father gods of Mesopotamia, El plays a peculiarly weak and inept role in the life of the world.* Three episodes in particular bring this out.

6 For an analysis of this epic as a story about resistances to growing up, see Thorkild Jacobson, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 218-19.

7 For the sake of convenience, references in the following discussion are to the widely accessible translation of these myths by H. L. Ginsberg in Pritchard (ed.), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (see n. 5 above), where an older numbering system is used than the one now in vogue (see J. C. L. Gibson, *Canaanite Myths and Legends* [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1977]).

In what is generally regarded as one of the major episodes of the opening drama of this myth the gods are shown assembling at the home of El in the far north (III AB B). Baal is standing at his father's side when messengers arrive from Yam-Nahar (Sea River) demanding of the assembly and of El that Baal be handed over to them. Apparently they wish to destroy him and inundate the land over which he presides. Their challenge is thus similar to that posed by Tiamat in the *Enuma Elis*. In this instance, however, Sea River is not thought of as the primeval mother but as another son in the family of El. In any case, El and his assembly appear to be just as powerless to deal with the challenge as were their Mesopotamian counterparts. To our surprise, in fact, El accedes to the wishes of Yam-Nahar (either out of fear or because he favoured Yam-Nahar in the first place). But Baal is quite prepared to take matters into his own hands. Ignoring his father and obtaining the help of a divine craftsman, he sets about clubbing Yam-Nahar into submission (III AB A). *In this myth the son not only rises above the weak father to rule the world (as in Mesopotamia), but does so in the face of his father's pathetic willingness to let him be destroyed.*

There follows the story of how, in the aftermath of this deed, Baal managed to obtain for himself a palace (II AB; V AB). In Mesopotamia Marduk was gladly given a house by the divine fathers in recognition of his deeds on their behalf. In the Canaanite myth Baal's destruction of Yam-Nahar initially went unrecognized by his father. As it turns out, father El had to be browbeaten into allowing his son to have a house of his own. The goddess Anath, Baal's sister, plays a particularly important role in this part of the drama. When she learns that her brother, in spite of his victory over Sea River (Yam-Nahar), is still living at home and without a house of his own, she is furious and threatens to bloody her father's gray hair if he does not do something (V AB E, 6-14).

A kind of crescendo in the Baal stories is reached in a final episode where yet another member of this divine family is introduced, one whose destructive fury no one, apparently not even Baal, can tame or control. This is El's son Mot (death) who, 'one lip to earth and one to heaven' (I* AB ii, 1), swallows him, thereby consigning him to the nether world. In the face of this tragedy father El is portrayed as particularly helpless and distraught. Earlier he was ready enough to let Baal be taken captive by Yam-Nahar. But now that Baal is actually dead, he descends from his throne, throws himself into the dust and covers his loins with sackcloth (I* AB vi). Salvation comes not from him, but again from Baal's sister Anath who somehow rescues him from Mot's jaws.

Thus in Canaan, as in Mesopotamia, it is not the father, but the son (and in this instance also his sister) who creates the conditions necessary for a tolerable existence in this dangerous universe. And they do this, more often than not, in opposition to the father, or in the face of his pathetic weakness, not with his blessing and help. Fathers head up the cosmic home, these myths seem to be saying. They can even be kindly at points and emotionally involved in what is happening around them, but for the most part they are mere figureheads, not the ones really in charge.

Osiris and Isis

Basic clues to the dynamics at work in Egyptian life and religion can also be found in myths that functioned paradigmatically throughout Egyptian history. The most important of these, strangely enough, are nowhere to be found in their entirety in extant Egyptian literature. For their preservation we are indebted to the Greek historian Plutarch who lived in the first century C.E. and pieced them together from written and oral traditions available to him at that time. They concern the Egyptian parental deities Isis (mother) and Osiris (father).⁸ The stories begin by telling of the benevolent rule of father Osiris over Egypt by means of which he was able to bring widespread peace and prosperity. He then set about carrying his teachings to the rest of the world. During his absence, his sister-wife Isis ruled Egypt in his place.

A dark turning point in the story occurred, however, upon his return when a banquet was held in his honour to which his brother Set, along with others, had been invited. During the banquet, a coffin was brought into the hall and Osiris was tricked into lying in it. When he did so, Set and those with him rose up and put a lid on the box, took it from the banquet hall, and floated it down the Nile River. This might have been the end of the story, were it not for the reaction of Isis. Briefly summarized, she set off in search of her husband's corpse, eventually found it, brought it back to Egypt and conceived a son, Horus, by it. Once again, however, the wicked Set entered the picture. Having learned of the return of his brother's corpse, he went and stole it and, after chopping it into fourteen pieces, scattered them all over Egypt. Isis, however, rescued her husband a second time and now, by means of magical rites and incantations, succeeded in restoring him to life in the afterworld. There, the Egyptians believed, Osiris continued to reign, his benevolent image in the course of time merging with that of the solar deity Re (sun). A final chapter of the myth relates how Osiris commissioned and empowered his son, Horus, to avenge his murder. This Horus subsequently did in several bloody battles in which Set was roundly defeated and destroyed.

Unique to this myth, in comparison to the Mesopotamian and Canaanite stories we have just reviewed, is the degree to which there is present a powerful, wise father who brought peace to Egypt and in doing so succeeded as well in winning the loyalty and respect of wife and son. *But here, too, the image of the father is a flawed one.* How easily Osiris was outwitted by his wicked brother! He would appear to be naive. *As a consequence his wife and son were compelled to play excessively demanding roles on his behalf.* True, in Egyptian imagination Osiris was the ultimate power who ruled the universe from his home in eternity, but the stories declared that his very existence there was due to the saving action of his wife, and it was his son finally who had to rule on earth and vindicate his name. *In Egypt, too, as in Mesopotamia and Canaan, a son, and in this*

8 For an English translation of Plutarch's rendering of these myths, see J. Griffiths, *Plutarch's De Iside et Osiride: Edited with an Introduction, Translation and Commentary* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1970).

*instance also his mother, are the ultimate guarantors of the triumph of life over death.*⁹

The Bible

The Bible has no stories to tell about its god comparable to those we have just surveyed. And yet, it would be misleading to say that it has no myths. Rather, here there has occurred 'a reorientation of the locale of myth,' as John Priest has put it.¹⁰ Instead of interacting with other gods, the biblical god is portrayed in his relations with an historical people, Israel. Thus, 'the history of Israel is the biography' of its god and 'the mode of the Israelite expression of myth.'¹¹

Three characteristics of the god so revealed are highlighted in almost all the stories about him. There is, first of all, the fact that he is 'he' (and not 'she').¹² This 'he,' of course, is a divine father (Deut. 32:6, Jer. 3:19, Isa. 63:16, Mal. 2:10, Luke 11:2, Eph. 3:14f.), not a son, and one who in some sense is like the God of the fathers (Exod. 3:15) and 'El,' the father of the gods (Gen. 33:20, Josh. 22:22).¹³

Contrasting sharply with every other father deity we have looked at so far is his insistence, secondly, that those who serve him shall serve him exclusively and alone (Exod. 20:3, Deut. 5:7). This unique attribute is explained in several texts as resulting from his 'jealousy' (Exod. 20:5; Deut. 5:9, 32:16; Josh. 24:19; Num. 25:11). In one text his very name is said to be 'the jealous one' for, it adds, 'a jealous god [el] is he' (Exod. 34:14).¹⁴ Being father (and not mother), this jealousy must be understood, first of all, as paternal jealousy directed against competing mother, son, and daughter deities for the right to primacy in his own family. In other words, in *biblical myth a divine father has divested himself, so to speak, of the cowardice and passivity so often attributed to fathers in extra-biblical myth and is viewed as taking charge of the affairs of his household* (Exod. 4:22b-23).

9 Concerning the way this myth reflected and influenced father-son-mother relations in Egyptian society, see Jan Assmann, 'Das Bild des Vaters im alten Agypten,' in G. Bornkamm et al. (eds.), *Das Vaterbild in Mythos und Geschichte* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1976), 24-27.

10 John Priest, 'Myth and Dream in Hebrew Scripture,' in Joseph Campbell (ed.), *Myths, Dreams and Religion* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1970), 55.

11 *Ibid.*, 56.

12 The pronoun 'he' is very close to being a divine name in the expression 'I am he' (Deut. 32:39, Isa. 43:10, etc.), 'you are he' (Psalm 102:27). On this usage and the possible importance of 'he' as an initial focus of cultic devotion in biblical religion, see S. Mo-winkel, 'The Name of the God of Moses,' *Hebrew Union College Annual* 33 (1961), 121-33.

13 El is both the name of the Canaanite father deity and the generic term for god. Evidence pointing to a link between Canaanite El and the God of the Bible is reviewed by J. J. M. Roberts, 'El,' in *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Supplementary Volume (Nashville: Abingdon, 1976), 255-58. Concerning the representation of God as father in the Bible, see Robert Hammerton-Kelly, *God the Father: Theology and Patriarchy in the Teaching of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979).

14 The characterization of Yahweh as 'jealous' is 'the basic element in the whole or idea of God,' according to Walter Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, Vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), 210, n. 1.

The very name of this god, Yahweh, may itself be symbolic of this remarkable transformation. It is quite likely a third-person singular (masculine) causative form of the verb 'to be' ('he causes to be') and there are reasons to think that originally it may have been used in conjunction with el (god), as in Psalm 10:12, with the meaning: el causes to be.¹⁵ To the question *what* does god (or el) cause to be, Parke-Taylor has argued that it is his own people.¹⁶ This, in any case, is the answer implied by Psalm 100, Isaiah 43:1, and Deuteronomy 32:6, the latter of which asks: 'Is it not he (Yahweh) your father who created you, who made you and established you?' *Yahweh, then, is a divine father, but, unlike his paternal contemporaries, a uniquely active one ('he causes to be')*. In his zeal (jealousy) he created a people among whom he lives as the sole guiding force.

A third characteristic of this god is his goodness. This was unforgettably demonstrated by the very way he created a people in the first place: his liberating them from slavery (Exod. 15), and his gracious covenant involving stipulations (Exod. 20), all of which were seen to be for the well-being of the community (Psalm 15:7-11). But this was also the essence of what was revealed concerning him in a remarkable audition that occurred in the aftermath of these events. To Moses' request for a glimpse of his 'glory' (Exod. 33:18), 'Yahweh passed before him and proclaimed, "Yahweh, Yahweh, a God [el] merciful and gracious, slow to anger, great in goodness and faithfulness . . ."' (Exod. 34:6f.).¹⁷

Generally speaking, this is the portrait of God that we encounter throughout the biblical story, Old and New Testaments, with now this, now that feature emphasized. There is one god and one god only to be worshipped and served. *He is a divine father, yet not cowardly or withdrawn like so many of his paternal contemporaries, but alert, vigorously involved, and uniformly just, kind, and compassionate*. 'You, Yahweh, you yourself are our Father, Our Redeemer is your ancient name' (Isa. 63:16b). 'Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name' (Matt. 6:9).

Only here in the myths of the ancient Near East is it said that a father-god, worthy of being hallowed, is fully in charge of the cosmic home.

Concluding comments

The main purpose of this essay has been to highlight the contrasts that emerge when the divine father in biblical myth is compared with father divinities in several contemporary ancient Near Eastern mythologies. Such a comparison, as noted, raises questions about the assumption that biblical father religion is simply continuous with wider ancient Near Eastern patriarchalism. *It would appear to be more accurate to say, as does David Bakan, that the Bible registers an important socio-religious shift, one in*

15 The literature and arguments leading to this conclusion are reviewed by G. H. Parke-Taylor, *Yahweh: The Divine Name in the Bible* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1975), 46-52.

16 *Ibid.*, 60-61.

17 Concerning the central importance of this passage in Old Testament theology, see Brevard Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 615.

which, on the human level, men began assuming a larger role in the care of their families.¹⁸ That men will do this, or do it well, history teaches, cannot be taken for granted. A 'crisis of paternalization,' as Bakan terms it, is not only associated with certain periods in history; it is one that is repeated in the individual life histories of many males who, generation after generation, become fathers.¹⁹ And in this may lie, in part at least, the relevance of the Bible right down to the present. Its firm belief in God as an effectively caring father undergirds and encourages human fathers in the taking on of caretaking roles. In the light of what we now know about the importance of fathering for the emotional well-being of children, this may be viewed in itself as a not inconsiderable contribution to the life of the world.²⁰

18 David Bakan, *And They Took Themselves Wives: The Emergence of Patriarchy in Western Civilization* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979), 13.

19 Ibid.

20 Further to this point, see John Miller, 'The Contemporary Fathering Crisis: The Bible and Research Psychology,' *The Conrad Grebel Review* (Fall 1983), 21-37.