

# Judaism, Christianity, and Islam to the beginnings of modern civilization

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## Chapter One: The Old Gods

For a very long time, from before 3000 BC until far into the Iron Age, the lives of people from India to North Africa and southern Europe were centered on the care and feeding of the gods. This was not so in China and sub-Saharan Africa, and even temperate Europe may have gone without gods for much of its prehistory. But in southwest Asia, Egypt and the Mediterranean lands there were gods everywhere, several thousand of them, and men and women believed that taking good care of these gods was their most important duty.<sup>1</sup> In Latin the term for the “care” of the gods was *cultus*, and so we speak of the “cults” of the ancient gods.

In the lands of the gods every worshiper was necessarily a polytheist, or a person who believes in “many gods.” In Egypt, for example, each of the 42 district-capitals was the home of a god, and each of the 42 nome-gods had his or her own distinctive cult. Egyptians would have special reverence for the god of their own district, but they were well aware that up and down the Nile valley were dozens of other gods, all of them powerful and helpful.

### The image gods

Many of the gods were anthropomorphic images, statues in the form of a man or a woman but usually of superhuman size and always made from the finest materials. In Egypt some of the gods had animal shapes and are therefore called “theriomorphic,” and they too were images. The Greek word for “image” is *eikon*, and we may therefore refer to the cult of the image gods as “iconic.” The image gods lived in temples, some large and some small but all as splendid as the community could afford to build. In front of the temple regularly stood an altar, from which the god received the sacred meals that worshipers provided. The triad of image, temple and altar was characteristic of cults in the cities of Egypt and the Near East from ca. 3000 BC onward. In Greece and Italy iconic cults came much later, but by ca. 500 BC every proper Greek, Etruscan and Latin city had at least three image gods, usually housed in three impressive temples.

The image gods were magnificent, designed to take your breath away when you caught a glimpse of them on festival days. On such occasions worshipers were momentarily transported to another plane of existence, away from the humdrum of daily life and into the presence of divinity. Although Egyptian gods tended to be small and exquisite, in other lands the iconic deities were large. Some cities of Greece and Mesopotamia boasted of gods who were forty feet tall, although usually deities of that size had to be seated on thrones (architects had difficulty designing temples large enough to accommodate so tall a god). The core of the statue might have been wood, but if the community was wealthy enough the core was covered with ivory, silver or gold, and beautiful stones were used for the eyes and accouterments.

Although made visible in a cult statue, the god was not identical with the statue. After the carpenters and metalsmiths had crafted the statue, a ceremony was performed through which the god entered the physical material.<sup>2</sup> In Egypt the ceremony was called the “opening of the

mouth,” and was performed with special instruments and elaborate rituals. Mesopotamians had a similar ceremony for their cult images. With the *mīs pî* (“mouth washing”) ritual the Akkadian god took up residence in the statue. Should some misfortune befall the statue and necessitate repairs, a ritual temporarily released the god from the statue. After repairs were completed the *mīs pî* was performed again, and the god was once again present in his or her material form.

It is obvious that for the construction of a temple and an iconic god, and for the maintenance of the cult, a complex social system and much surplus wealth was required. Iconic cults were therefore characteristic of cities and kingdoms, and the most spectacular of the image gods were almost always to be found in cities where enormous political and military power was centered. In Egypt, as the pharaohs shifted their capital from one place to another in the Nile valley the gods of successive cities became great: first Horus at Nekhen, then Ptah at Memphis, Re at Heliopolis, and finally - greatest of all - Amon at Thebes.

However impressive the iconic gods may have been, we find it hard to understand how millions of people, one generation after another for thousands of years, could have believed that the statues were gods. The principle at work here, as in so much of human history, was captured in Hans Christian Andersen’s tale, “The Emperor’s New Clothes.” If enough people believe something, you and I too are likely to believe it, no matter how contrary it may be to what we see and to “common sense.” In the liturgical traditions of Christianity the sacrament of the eucharist - the mass - defies common sense, but for almost two thousand years Christians have believed that through the sacrament they receive the body and blood of Jesus the Christ. If we had grown up in a city where for several millennia all its inhabitants had been singing hymns and praying to a big and beautiful statue, where the priests of the statue were the most respected men in the city, and where people regularly brought hard-earned sacrifices to the statue’s altar, we too would see the statue as a god.

It may be that when the iconic cults first began, late in the fourth millennium BC, some of them may have needed a few generations to catch hold of the popular imagination, especially if the first temples and statues were not very well made. But once they caught on and became splendid, and once the priesthoods were numerous and powerful, the statues were regarded as divine by all the communities in whose midst they stood. Only once during the Bronze Age had a serious attack on them been made: in Egypt ca. 1350 BC the pharaoh Akhenaton concluded that the image gods were not gods at all, and that the whole world was ruled and blessed by a single god, the sun. Because he was the pharaoh Akhenaton had some success in “converting” his subjects. He closed the iconic gods’ great temples, ended the sacrifices and dispersed the priesthoods. But he was hated for his actions and beliefs, and at his death the great temples were reopened, the statues were once again acknowledged as gods, and Akhenaton’s memory was cursed.

Today the cult-statues - all of them - are long gone. At many places, however, one can still see ruins of the temples in which gods once stood. And in the precincts around these ruined temples inscriptions have turned up, which recount in detail the affairs of the cult when its god was still taken seriously. How devoted worshipers once were is demonstrated most vividly on

those rare occasions when archaeologists discover a deposit of votive offerings dedicated to the resident god. Votive offerings were often made by people of modest means, and these offerings testify to the affection and esteem in which worshipers held the god to whom they brought their gifts.

## **The invisible gods**

Although the iconic cults of antiquity are fairly well known because of their material remains, more cults were aniconic: they had, that is, no cult statues. These aniconic cults may have been a somewhat later development, established as a *faute de mieux* alternative to the image cults. Semi-nomadic pastoralists and villagers who lived far from a city had neither the expertise nor the wherewithal to construct impressive statues and elaborate temples, and so imagined for themselves invisible gods. These gods were supposed to live on mountaintops or in the heavens, beyond the sight of mortals but responsive to their calls when invited to a sacrificial feast. Many of the invisible gods were worshiped at “high places,” flat hilltops or commodious mesas a third or half way up the side of a mountain. After the community had climbed to the high place, the crowd would with prayers, song and dance summon the god from the heavens. After the officiants signaled that the god had arrived, they would sacrifice the sheep or the ox that had been brought along as a victim.

It is important to understand that the aniconic gods were just as anthropomorphic - just as much “like humans” - as were the image gods. Although invisible, that is, the aniconic god was no less a “person” than was the god who stood in a temple. Yahweh was male, Asherah was female. El was elderly, Baal youthful. All were imagined as great, incorporeal or dreamlike beings in human form. The Israelites never made a graven image of Yahweh but they visualized him as an anthropomorphic apparition of immense size. When they built a temple for him they made the Holy of Holies thirty feet high, with each of his two winged and attendant cherubim fifteen feet tall. The aniconic gods were thus imagined as incorporeal super-humans, possibly with extra appurtenances such as wings. They differed from humans in their miraculous power, in their immortality, and in their invisibility or lack of physicality.

In their “inner life,” however, the aniconic gods were entirely human. Just like men and women, they loved and hated, laughed and wept, grew angry and relented, were jealous and generous, vengeful and merciful. Finally, the invisible gods (no less than the image gods) *thought* like people thought. Of course a god knew much more than humans knew, and some of the gods were supposed to know everything, past, present and future. Often, however, a god was disappointed that things did not turn out as he or she had hoped. So Poseidon, furious because his son Polyphemos had been blinded by Odysseus (*Odyssey* 9), tried but failed to prevent Odysseus from sailing home to Ithaca. And at I Sam 15 we see that Yahweh, sorry that he had made Saul the king of Israel, decided to try again with David. Because the imaginary form of the aniconic gods was human (although super-human), and because they were personified from a human model, the terms “anthropopathic” and “anthropomorphic” may as well be applied to them as to those gods that were made visible in statues.

Aniconic cults were the norm in the less urbanized parts of the Levant and in much of

Anatolia. In Iran and India too the typical god lived in the heavens. The Indian gods were those hymned in the Vedas: Varuna (cognate to the Greek Ouranos, or Heaven), Mitra, the Nasatya twins, the Maruts, Agni, and - the greatest of all - Indra, god of war. By the seventh century BC the Greeks had built cities for themselves and temples for their gods. A century earlier, however, Homer and Hesiod had thought of the gods as dwelling on Mt. Olympos, and in northern Greece (where cities were few and far between) people were generally agreed that the gods lived either on the mountain or in the sky. Wherever they lived, the invisible gods were able to fly in a moment to distant places, even to the ends of the earth where the Aithiopians lived, in order to bless their worshipers with their presence.

Making a virtue of necessity, uncivilized people came to regard their invisible gods as superior to the elaborate and expensive image gods who were worshiped in the cities. Going still further, some uncivilized societies insisted that the only true gods were invisible: the images were not gods at all, and to construct a graven image of your god was an affront to him or her. Emboldened by and acting on this belief, ca. 1200 BC raiders from uncivilized and disadvantaged places all round the Mediterranean assaulted and plundered cities, palaces and temples. After sacking and burning a city and its temple, the raiders were undoubtedly confirmed in their conviction that their invisible god had shown himself to be much stronger than the image god of the city that now lay smoldering before them. Among the most successful raiders were the "Sons of Israel," who under the aegis of their war-god Yahweh Sabaoth ("Yahweh of the Armies") sacked cities and slaughtered populations all over southern Canaan. Not surprisingly, the Hebrew Bible insisted that no graven image anywhere was a match for the invisible and invincible Yahweh.

The raids ca. 1200 BC, however, were an exception to the rule that cities and civilized lands were - almost by definition - much better off than "barbarian" lands. The kingdom of Israel was subjugated and eventually abolished by the Assyrians, whose great god was the statue named Ashur. And in 587 BC the kingdom of Judah succumbed to the Chaldeans, who in Babylon worshiped at the altar of the god Marduk, perhaps the greatest of all the image gods. Typically, then, worshipers at the iconic cults knew they had much to be thankful for. The greater and richer a temple was, the more certain worshipers were that the god inside was a great and powerful god indeed.

## **Sacrifice and worship**

Although we see the gods as creations of the ancient societies, the ancients themselves saw it the other way round: humankind was created by the gods, in order to serve them. That worship of the gods was the most important duty of humankind, and in fact was its reason for existing, was stated most baldly in the Babylonian Creation Epic. Marduk, having slain the monster Tiamat, created heaven and earth, and then decided to create man:

Blood I will mass and cause bones to be.  
I will establish a savage, 'man' shall be his name.  
Verily, savage man I will create.  
He shall be charged with the service of the gods

That they might be at ease.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, humans were created so that the gods would not have to concern themselves with such things as finding proper food, shelter and entertainment. All of that would henceforth be supplied by their human worshipers.

Whether iconic or aniconic, in all the cults of the Bronze Age and early Iron Age sacrifice was the most important part and the culmination of worship. Everyone needs to eat, and the gods were no exception. A few of the gods were vegetarian, but typically a god preferred offerings of meat (as illustrated by the Biblical story of Cain and Abel). The animals sacrificed were of specified age, color and condition: lambs in the springtime, a horse for Indra or Poseidon, and for Yahweh a daily menu of sheep and oxen. The ritual of sacrifice had three main stages: the killing of the animal, the giving of part of it to a god (usually by committing a small portion of the meat into the fire), and the distribution of the rest of the meat to the assembled worshipers.

Homo sapiens had all along made the killing of a large animal a community affair, and it is likely that even in the paleolithic period when people prepared a feast for themselves they would invite the spirits or divine *numina* to join them.<sup>4</sup> Before refrigeration, people needed to eat the meat of an animal soon after it was butchered, and the slaughter of a large animal was therefore an occasion for the entire community to gather for a feast (a single ox supplied enough meat for several hundred people). When the victim was butchered and the cuts of meat were roasted on the altar, the smoke and aroma wafted inside the temple and were enjoyed by the god, while outside the worshipers contented themselves with steaks and fillets. The Greek poet Hesiod was pleased to report that In the Beginning, when sacrificial animals were first slain, the gods chose for themselves the bones, leaving the meat to mortals.

Although the sacrifice was the high point of a festival or a holy day, the worship of a god included much else. Because music, both vocal and instrumental, was as pleasing to the gods as to mortals, the sacrifice was normally preceded by hymns, songs, and the playing of flutes and stringed instruments. The great temples employed professional musicians and dancers, but even the aniconic gods at their high places were treated to the best music that their worshipers could come up with. Like dogs, children and adult men and women, the gods delighted in being praised. The psalms in the Hebrew Bible were composed for Yahweh: they praise him for his great strength and righteousness, thank him for his blessings, and pray for their continuance. We are especially well informed about the hymns that accompanied sacrifices in India during the late second and early first millennia BC. No less than 1028 hymns, sung to one or another of the gods in the Aryan pantheon, have come down to us in the Rig-veda (“The Veda of Chants”). A slightly later and shorter Veda, the Sama-veda, instructs the singer how the hymns are to be sung, whether in a simple chant or in a more elaborate setting.

Prayers and rituals were obviously essential. The book of Leviticus in the Hebrew Bible provides detailed instructions not only for the butchering of sacrificial animals, but also for the rituals that precede and accompany the sacrifices. The Avesta, the sacred book of ancient Iran, includes a long section on prayers and rituals. In India the Yajur-veda stipulated what was to be said and done at the sacrificial festivals, and how altars were to be constructed.

Professional priests were typically in charge of the ceremonies, and it was their responsibility to know precisely the traditional prayers, hymns and liturgical formulas that elicited the gods' favor. In most places the language in which a cult had originally been celebrated was no longer spoken by the average worshiper, and the chants and prayers were therefore no longer intelligible to most of the assembly. The priest, however, would know the prayers in the original and now-dead language, and so would be able to recite them perfectly. Such was the mechanism by which the Sanskrit language in India was preserved: the hymns of the Rig-veda that priests and pandits sang ca. 500 BC were by then a thousand years old, and the average Indian who heard them had only a foggy notion of what the hymns meant. Much the same had happened in Anatolia: in north-central Anatolia the Hattic and Palaic languages had been vigorous in the third millennium BC but by the middle of the second had entirely given way to Hittite and Luwian. The religious texts that the gods of Hatti and Pala knew and loved were nevertheless transmitted carefully by their priests, one generation after another, so that even ca. 1200 BC the god Zapparfa in Pala and the Sun Goddess of Arinna in Hatti still delighted in their beloved Palaic and Hattic hymns. In Mesopotamia the Sumerian language was already dying ca. 2000 BC, but the Sumerian gods continued to be hymned and praised in their own language for another fifteen hundred years. The original language of Yahweh's cult was Hebrew, and even though Hebrew had become obsolete as a spoken language by ca. 400 BC (people in Judah and the rest of the Levant were by then speaking Aramaic) the psalms composed for Yahweh continued to be sung in Hebrew.

## **Purity**

Everywhere the ritual of worship demanded purity. For every god a ritual space was demarcated, within which certain human behaviors were required and certain others forbidden.<sup>5</sup> This was obviously true for a temple and its sacred environs (the *temenos*), but it also was also true for the high place to which an invisible god regularly came. Purity of behavior was incumbent upon the priests or sacrificiants especially, but demands were also made on the entire throng of worshipers. Purity was for the most part synonymous with "cleanliness," a word that is more subjective than objective. Anything dirty, that is, or disgusting or inappropriate, was bound to disgust the god and would therefore vitiate the sacrifice and the entire ceremony. At a minimum, clean clothes and decorous behavior were required. Priests often wore clothes of white linen, and in a few cults so did all of the worshipers. People with running sores or disabilities were kept away, lest they disgust the god. A fart, a sneeze, or even a cough was almost sure to spoil the ceremony. Because of offensive odors, menstruating women were forbidden to attend.

As concerns and demands for purity increased, which they tended to do, it was not enough for the ritual itself to be "clean." Eventually it became obligatory for anyone associated with the ceremony to avoid "uncleanness" in the days before the ceremony and even - in some places - for life. Priests could be defiled by what they ate, and so the eating of "unclean" food was forbidden. Occasionally the list of forbidden foods grew long and burdensome. What clothes the sacrificiant could and could not wear without besmirching his purity was also specified.

Except for Aphrodite, Astarte and other female deities whose bailiwick was love and reproduction, the gods did not wish to see or hear about sexual intercourse. Because intercourse was usually regarded as defiling, the priests of many temples were forbidden to have intercourse with their wives on the night before a sacrifice. In a few cults the priests were required to remain celibate throughout their priesthood. The Vestal Virgins at Rome, for example, kept pure the sacred fire of Vesta, and the Romans believed that if one of the Virgins was unchaste the entire city would be imperiled. An extreme was reached in Anatolia, where only eunuchs could serve as priests of the Great Mother.

The importance of purity is illustrated by the requirements that the Amon cult in Egypt promulgated from the Twenty-Fifth Dynasty (ca. 700 BC) onward. It is also apparent in the Deuteronomic and Priestly writers' compositions in the Hebrew Bible. These requirements, however, were meant (at least originally) only for those actually participating in the sacrifice. With the passage of time purity obligations were in some cults extended to all worshipers. Unusually detailed purity regulations were formulated, memorized, and transmitted through the centuries by the Magi of northwestern Iran. Their rules appear in the Vendidad, which ultimately constituted the first "volume" of the Avesta. The Vendidad consists of 22 sections, or Fargards, each Fargard instructing the devout worshiper of Mazda about some aspect of purity, purification, and uncleanness. Do not go within three paces of a menstruating woman, do not dispose of trimmed hair or nails in a "pure" element, and by all means do not go anywhere near a dead body! The goal of the Vendidad is ritual purity, and keeping the sacred elements (fire, earth) free from contamination by the Unclean.

## **The gods' blessings**

In return for all of this ritual purity, for the sacrifices, and for the rest of the worship that they received from the human community, the gods showered their blessings upon the community. It was the gods who provided good weather, fertile fields and bountiful harvests, health, plentiful offspring for humans and animals, prosperity, and protection from enemies. All of these were temporal and material blessings, because it was the physical world that the gods oversaw. Although the blessings came indirectly to individuals, immediately and collectively they came to the entire community. All of the cults, whether iconic or aniconic, can therefore be called "civic": the state (in Latin, the *civitas*) was both the provider of the cult and the beneficiary of the god's services.

For his or her private troubles an individual could approach one or another of the specialized gods. Women about to experience the pains and dangers of giving birth, for example, would make offerings to Eileithyia or Lucina or one of the other female gods whose special province was a safe childbirth. A god of healing might receive a small, private votive sacrifice if the person who made the vow experienced the god's healing powers. Persons faced with a dilemma could approach one of the oracular gods and, in exchange for a gift, ask for advice about what to do. And at the end, when a person died his or her family would make an offering to the chthonic deities in charge of the underworld. But all of the specialized "helper" gods were generally less in evidence and much less important than the civic gods. The great



gods of the Bronze Age and early Iron Age were civic gods: Indra, Varuna, Mazda, Astarte, Marduk, Ashur, Yahweh, Athena, Zeus, Re, Amon, and many more. The community worshiped each of these gods with hymns, praise and sacrifices, and in return the god gave his or her blessings to the whole community.

## **The power and limitations of the gods**

Every ancient society had a creation story, which accounted for heaven and earth and everything that lived on the earth. In many, although not all, of these stories a god created the world. The Babylonian Creation Epic recounted how Marduk had slain the monstrous Tiamat, and from her body had made the sky and put the stars in their constellations (from the blood of her consort he created humankind). The Egyptians had various creation stories, the priests at various temples crediting their god with the work: Atum at Heliopolis, Ptah at Memphis, Min at Koptos, Amon at Thebes, and at other places still other gods. The Greek myths did not feature a creator god: heaven and earth had come into being many divine generations before Zeus was born. The sun, moon and stars, therefore, were not under the control of Zeus but were themselves divine powers.

Although many gods were celebrated as the world's creator, none of them had complete control of it. All of the gods had supernatural powers, and in his or her own bailiwick each god reigned supreme, but no god was omnipotent. The very condition of polytheism meant that a single god could not be responsible for the world and all its inhabitants. In most of the pantheons a senior god served to arbitrate disputes when two or more of the other gods were at cross-purposes. So in the Levant it was old El who might overrule Anat or Baal or some other young and headstrong god. Similarly, the early Greeks supposed that Zeus could override the wishes and projects of the other Olympians, but that even Zeus was powerless to prevent what was fated.

The early Israelites too assumed limits on the power of any one god, although over the centuries the continuous revision of their sacred books eliminated most traces of polytheism. In Israel *elohim* originally meant "the gods" and it was the gods as a group that took care of the land and its people. In the early tenth century BC, Yahweh was still primarily a god of war, and it was to him that offerings were made before a battle and after a victory. Other gods were approached for other blessings: Baal provided good weather, Asherah fertility, and El whatever else was required. Even after monolatry became the law of the land in Israel and Judah, and Yahweh was given credit for everything that happened to those kingdoms, his worshipers still assumed that the Gentiles were looked after by the gods of the Gentiles.

## **Patron gods**

In a large kingdom such as Egypt, in an imperial state such as Assyria, or in a cultural sphere such as Mesopotamia we find a pantheon consisting of many gods (at the height of their empire the Hittite kings boasted of having a thousand gods). It was not uncommon, however, for a state to concentrate its attention on a single patron deity. A patron god, or tutelary deity, was entirely concerned with the welfare of the kingdom that worshiped him or her. That was a

satisfactory arrangement, since each of the neighboring kingdoms was protected and blest by its own patron god. The god Ashur began as the tutelary deity of the city of Assur. In the high country of Urartu, north of Assyria, the patron god was Haldi. Athena eventually was worshiped by Hellenes everywhere, but in the Bronze Age she was understood to be the protector of Athens and she probably had no wider domain. In the southern Levant each kingdom typically had its own patron god: Israelites worshiped Yahweh, Ammonites worshiped Milkom, Moabites worshiped Kemosh, and so on.

The principal object of a patron god's affection was the corporate body, the kingdom in which he was worshiped. An individual might also receive the god's blessings, but those were incidental and the usual beneficiary was the political community. The great sacrifices and festivals were communal, with the priests acting as intermediaries between the state and its god. Likewise, when the patron god was angry because of some negligence or slight, he typically punished not the guilty individuals but the entire city or kingdom whose patron he was.

### **The stream of tradition**

The durability of the old gods, and of ancient polytheism, deserves another brief glance. In Mesopotamia and Egypt a "stream of tradition" maintained the image cults for more than three thousand years, and through most of that long period the cults remained vigorous.<sup>6</sup> Temples that had been founded in Egypt before 3000 BC were still attracting worshipers when Septimius Severus ruled the Roman Empire, in the third century CE. In at least a few cities Mesopotamians were still paying cult to Nabu and Marduk in the fifth century CE, and these gods had been worshiped since the time of Gilgamesh. A cult was an institution, with great buildings and endowments, with an ancient legacy of texts and rituals, and maintained by self-perpetuating guilds and priesthoods. The "stream of tradition" itself carried the cults, even after belief began to shrivel. Finally, of course, after the world's religious landscape had thoroughly changed, the stream dried up entirely and the gods were gone.

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1. Frankfort 1948 is still a valuable analysis of polytheism in the ancient Near East.
  2. For articles dealing with various aspects of the divinizing of cult statues in the ancient Near East see Dick 1999.
  3. Babylonian Creation Epic, tablet VI, translation by E. A. Speiser.
  4. For a good overview of sacrificial cult see Burkert 1983 and Heesterman 1993.
  5. Choksy 2003 looks especially at the requirements of ritual spaces in Zoroastrianism, but his observations apply also to the sacrificial religions and the "old gods."
  6. Oppenheim 1964 was one of the first to explore "the stream of tradition" in the long history of Mesopotamian civilization.