

Genesis in its Ancient Near Eastern Context

The following is a summary of a lecture given by Christine Hayes for an Old Testament class at Yale.

The people of the Ancient Near East (ANE) regarded the various natural forces of the world as imbued with divine power and as divinities themselves. The earth was a divinity, the sky was a divinity, the water was a divinity. In other words, the gods were identical with or imminent in the forces of nature. There were many gods and no one single god was all-powerful.

The fundamental idea of pagan religion is the idea that there exists a realm of being prior to the gods and above them, upon which the gods depend, and whose decrees they must obey: the metadivine realm. This is the realm of supreme and ultimate power and it transcends the deities. The deities emerge from and are therefore subject to the laws, forces, and powers of the metadivine realm. The nature of this realm will vary from pagan tradition to pagan tradition. It might be water, darkness, spirit, fate, or something else entirely.

Because of the metadivine realm, a realm that is beside or beyond the gods that is independent of them and primary, the gods are limited. They are not the source of all. They are bound by and subservient to this metadivine realm. There can therefore be no notion of a supreme divine will, an absolute or sovereign divine will. The will of any god can be countered by the decrees of the metadivine realm and perhaps also by the will of another god. So the gods are limited in power. And they are also limited in wisdom. They are not all-knowing or all-wise because of the existence of this realm that is beyond them and is mysterious and unpredictable to them.

The pagan religions of the ANE also contained mythologies and theogonies. Mythologies are tales of the lives of gods. The gods are born and they live lives very similar to human lives but on a grand scale and then they die. Theogonies are accounts of the births of gods. The impersonal metadivine realm contains the seeds of all beings: divine, human, and natural. Because of this, there is often a very fluid boundary between the divine, human, and natural world. They blur into one another because they all emerge ultimately from the same metadivine world. This is seen in how the gods are very often associated with natural forces. The sky is a god; the fire is a god; fertility is a god. So there is no real distinction between the worship of gods and the worship of nature.

Whatever power the gods have is not due to the fact that their will is absolute. The metadivine realm is that which has ultimate power and the material of which it is made is what has ultimate power. So power is materially conceived. Power inheres in certain substances, particularly substances or materials that are deeply connected to whatever this metadivine world material is. So if it's blood, then blood that courses through the veins of living creatures is seen to have some deep and powerful connection with the metadivine realm and that is where power resides. If it is water, then water will be viewed as particularly materially powerful. So gods have power only insofar as they are connected with the metadivine material. This means magic is

possible in such a system. Because power is materially conceived, since it is believed to inhere in certain natural substances that resemble or are connected to the metadivine material that is the source of all power, then magic is possible by manipulating those material substances in certain ways. It might be clay, water, blood, or something else. Through magical manipulation of certain substances, humans can harness the forces of the metadivine realm and make these forces come to bear on even the gods. So magic in a pagan system is a way of getting around the gods, circumventing the capricious will of the gods.

Additionally, in the pagan view evil is a metaphysical reality. It is built into the structure of the universe. The universe is an amoral universe. There are gods who are legislators and guardians of social order and justice. But their laws aren't absolute: they can be leveled by the decrees of the supreme metadivine realm. And since the knowledge and wisdom of each god is limited, morality can be defined as what a particular god likes or desires and that may be different from what another god likes or desires. And so there is no absolute morality.

Genesis presents an alternative view of God. There is one divine power, one God. And this God is outside of and above nature. This God is not identified with nature. He transcends nature and is not known through nature or natural phenomena. He is known through history, events, and relationship with mankind. God is himself the source of all being and is not subject to a metadivine realm. He does not emerge from some preexisting realm and he is therefore free of all the limitations of myth and magic. God's will is absolute and sovereign. There is no theogony or mythology in Genesis. God isn't born from some primordial womb; he doesn't have a life story. There is no realm that is primary to him or prior to him and there is no realm that is the source of his power and wisdom. So in the opening chapters of Genesis, God simply is. He doesn't grow, he doesn't age, he doesn't mature, he doesn't have a female consort, he doesn't die. God is unlimited, timeless, ageless, nonphysical, and eternal.

As the sovereign of all realms, God isn't by nature bound to any particular realm. He's not identifiable as a force of nature or identified with a force of nature. Nature certainly becomes the stage of God's expression of his will. He expresses his will and purpose through forces of nature. But nature isn't God himself. He's not identified with it. He's wholly other. He isn't kin to humans in any way either. So there is no blurring, no soft boundary between humans and the divine.

Magic in the Bible is represented as useless. There's no metadivine realm to tap into. Power doesn't inhere in any material substances in the natural world. God can't be manipulated or coerced by magic.

Sin is not caused by an independent evil power that exists out there in the universe and is defying the will of God. Instead evil comes about as a result of the clash of the will of God and the will of humans who have the freedom to rebel. There's nothing inherently supernatural about sin. It's not a force or a power built into the universe. Evil is a moral and not a metaphysical reality. It doesn't have a concrete independent existence. And that means that human beings and only human beings are the potential source of evil in the world. Responsibility for evil lies in the hands of human beings.

Pagan Religion	Israelite Religion
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many gods • Gods are limited • Mythology/Theogony • Fluid boundary between divine/human/natural world • Power is materially conceived • Magic to manipulate metadivine realm • Evil is metaphysical • Amoral universe 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One God • God is unlimited • No mythology/theogony • God is transcendent above nature, not identified with it • No material power • Magic is useless • Evil is moral • Absolute morality defined by God