

Notes on Quiz #4

History of Ancient Religion • Fall 2022

1. The author of this week's reading on monotheism makes a distinction between "evolutionary monotheism" and "revolutionary monotheism." What is evolutionary monotheism? How is revolutionary monotheism different?

Evolutionary monotheism involves a process in a polytheistic society whereby a particular god becomes dominant over a pantheon, gradually subsuming the roles of the other gods, so that divinities other than this central god are seen as aspects of the will and power of that god. Over time, this dominant god becomes thought of as the Supreme Being, a superdeity, with all other gods being one and the same with that deity. This process describes the supremacy of Marduk in Babylon, for example, and the way Ahura Mazda subsumed all the divinities of order and good in Zoroastrianism.

Revolutionary monotheism, in contrast, starts as rejection of a set of beliefs—revolutionary monotheism involves first stating what god is not and how god should not be worshipped. Revolutionary monotheism is based on the distinction between true and false, between one true god and the rest of the forbidden, false, or nonexistent gods. Only revolutionary monotheism requires a divide between orthodoxy and heterodoxy, with punishments for those who believe wrongly. Such a reform was attempted by Akhenaten, a New Kingdom pharaoh, but most closely describes "biblical monotheism" (i.e., Judaism, Christianity, and Islam).

2. What kinds of reforms were associated with king Josiah? What were the long-term effects?

Josiah was associated with the "deuteronomic reforms," in which the structures of a newly discovered "book of the law"—thought to be the book now called Deuteronomy—were imposed on the Judean people ca. 621 BCE during the critical period between the deportation of Israel and the Babylonian exile. These reforms centralized the cult of Yahweh. Sacrifices could only be performed at the temple of Yahweh in Jerusalem; all other altars, whether to Yahweh or any other god, were destroyed throughout Judea. The worship of Canaanite gods such as Baal and Asherah were suppressed.

In the short term, Josiah's reforms did not wipe out the worship of other gods, which according to contemporary prophets persisted in the decades after Josiah's death. But the emphasis on the book of the law meant that the Judean religion could be brought with them to Babylon in their exile, a physical focal point of their faith and a reflection of the fact that Yahweh was bound, not to the land as with pagan gods, but to those who were observers of his law.

3. What is the connection between monotheism and the importance of scripture?

Revealed truth that cannot be reexperiences in any natural way must be codified for transmission to future generations. Whereas polytheism tends to rely on observation, divination, and maintenance of customary practices, revolutionary monotheism requires persistence of words and truths revealed by god. This leads to the development by the first generations of highly normative and canonized scripture, which fixes the truth of god and dictates the practice of adherents.

Canonized scripture is found in religions derived via revolutionary monotheism, including Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, as well as the dualist Zoroastrianism and eastern religions focused on regularizing social behavior, such as Buddhism, Daoism, and others.

- EC1. "Hyphenating gods" refers to:

- (a) Breaking the name of a god into its component syllables
- (b) Making a list of all gods in a pantheon where all their names are joined together
- (c) Two gods combining their names when they get married
- ✓ (d) The Egyptian practice of pairing the local name of a god with a corresponding figure shared across communities

- EC2. This week's reading was "Abraham and Isaac". What do you think this reading suggests about how the Jews who told this story (centuries after Abraham) thought about their god and their relationship with him? Give an example of what you mean.

This question is subjective; a number of ideas could be brought up here, including the necessity of total obedience, faith, and sacrifice; the "imminence" of Yahweh, actively involved in manipulating the actions of his people in a way that recalls the gods of Syria and Canaan; and the suggestion of strict patriarchy, with Abraham neglecting to consult Isaac and thus depriving him of the chance to offer himself willingly to god.