

Notes on Quiz #5

History of Ancient Religion • Fall 2022

1. What are some common elements of ancient creation myths?

Creation myths involved a number of common elements across various cultures. Most notably, many creation myths involved a primeval conflict among the gods, often with a hero-god overcoming earlier, more chaotic gods and establishing order. This is seen (for example) with Marduk, who rose to defeat his destructive mother and formed the world from her carcass, and with Zeus, who defeated his father and imprisoned or killed the primitive Titans and established the rule of order, fathering the deities of Olympus.

The means of creation tended to be either (a) procreative, using divine sperm or spit; (b) invocative, with the creator god pronouncing the existence of creation; or (c) by means of craft, e.g. a potter or blacksmith god forming the universe by hand.

In most creation myths, the world was created either by a hero-god imposing order or by a demiurge crafting or invoking the world from the materials of the cosmos. However, in some mythologies (e.g., that of the Hellenistic Greeks), the earth was eternal and the creation stories involved the birth of the gods.

2. According to the author of the first Egypt article, the Egyptians saw the cosmos as a "process." What did he mean by that, and how were the gods involved?

According to the Egyptians, the cosmos was a process rather than a space. This meant that the idea of order involved the Egyptian divinities being involved in a constant effort at overcoming disorder and destruction. Most of the gods cooperate in the project of maintaining the world and keeping the cosmic process going. The success of this process was not taken for granted and order was constantly at stake.

This core of this process was the solar circuit, the path that the sun-god Re followed through the heavens by day and the netherworld by night. The assistance of mortals was also required, through the propagation of ma'at (harmony and balance) in the mortal realm and aiding the gods where needed.

3. What were some the ways the arrival of the Ptolemies (305-30 BCE) affected religion in Egypt?

The conquest of Egypt by Alexander the Great inaugurated a new period of Greek influence, or Hellenism, on Egypt. This was enshrined in the rule of the Ptolemies, the Macedonian-Greek successors of Alexander in Egypt. Egypt was deluged with Greek language, Greek thinking, Greek technology, and Greek forms of creative expression.

However, Hellenism, far from smothering Egyptian tradition, was instead leveraged by Egyptians as a further means of championing the supremacy of Egyptian religion over others. Greek language and techniques were used to promote Egyptian religious ideas in texts, sculptures, and other imagery, some which traveled far beyond Egypt.

The way Egypt held fiercely to its truly ancient traditions in a time of Hellenistic assimilation across the east had the side effect of making Egyptian culture seem exotic and foreign to other Hellenistic peoples, and the practitioners of its ancient religion mysterious and inscrutable, eventually leading to a perception of Egyptian priests as wizards and seers.

EC1. Ma'at was all of the following EXCEPT:

- (a) The purpose for which the sun-god Re placed pharaohs on Earth
- (b) The divine-inspired state of order, truth, and harmony
- ✓ (c) Sacrificed as a burnt offering on the completion of every solar cycle
- (d) The opposite of *isfet* (injustice)

EC2. Both the Mesopotamians and the Egyptians studied and tracked the stars, but for different reasons. What factors motivated the ancients' study of the heavens?

Mapping the heavens was critical for discerning anomalies therein, which was a useful tool for cultures with heavy reliance on divination, such as the Hittites and the Babylonians. Any unpredictable movement of the heavens (such as a comet or a supernova) would be interpreted via divination as a message from the gods.

Because the Egyptians believed in cycles and permanence, however, astrology for them involved charting the motions of the heavens in order to recognize its patterns and ensure mortals were acting in accordance with those patterns, as part of their responsibility to assist the divine in preserving ma'at on earth.