

Notes for Quiz #2

History of Ancient Religion • Fall 2022

1. How were individuals in antiquity subject to multiple religions at once? Give examples.

Not only is the ancient world a patchwork of local pagan religions, but with each community the individual was subjected to multiple levels of religious obligation.

At the most private level, a person had obligations to his or her household gods, which were less anthropomorphic and more spiritual manifestations of a family's abiding relationship with land and home. A family's rituals and traditions toward the household gods were different in each home, and operated entirely independently of the community's collective religious observances. Household religion was informed by cultural heritage, the land and home, private practices kept across generations, and the remembrance of ancestors.

A person was also obligated to small social groups based on neighborhoods (crossroads guilds, for example) or profession. One example of the latter is the military unit, which often (especially among the Romans) had shared religious obligations that reinforced their collective identity as a unit.

Finally, a citizen had religious obligations to the community and its collective relationship with the gods through cultic practice (rituals, games, festivals, sacrifices, and so on).

2. The Hittite Instructions to Temple Officials state, "Are the minds of man and gods somehow different? No!" How did the Hittites see the gods as being like mortals?

The Hittites saw the process of gaining favor with the gods as exactly like the appeasement of a lord or king: the gods, like nobles, could be brought around to a positive demeanor toward you if you offered gifts and massaged their egos. The mentality of the gods, in other words, was seen as very similar to that of humans when it came to seeking and achieving a positive outcome.

The main difference is that because of the barrier between the mortal and divine worlds, humans can speak directly to the gods but gods speak only indirectly. Thus their prevailing mood and demeanor must be ascertained through divination; the study of the movements of birds, water snakes, smoke, the oracular lot, and other omens.

3. According to the text, what might lead to the political or military oppression of a cult? Give an example.

The main idea here is that, in a world where peoples and individuals all are subjected to a wide array of complex religious obligations, suppression of religion tends to come about when the adherents of a religion form a strong enough identity that they pose a political threat.

The demeaning of a religion can be a tool of war, painting the enemy's beliefs as barbarian or seeking to deprive the enemy of their gods by annexing them onto your pantheon; but after conquest this tends to give way to integration. What's more likely is a religious group being seen as a threat within an empire because that group is forming a potent alternative identity to the empire's that endangers the empire's rule. This is seen with mystery cults, which are often joined by those who seek an alternative sense of who they are, and especially by the Jews and the Christians in the Roman Empire.

EC1. The religion of the Hittites involved:

(c) A pantheon of gods from many different cultures, including Hittite, Hattian, and Hurrian

EC2. This week's reading was "Divination Among the Hittites". What do you think this reading suggests about how the Hittites related to their gods? Give an example of what you mean.'

This is subjective, but there are a number of things that can be mentioned here. The thing that most stands out to me is that divination is used as a practical system to achieve specific desired results, whether that be knowledge, prophecy, cures, or military advantage.

Because this system is made up of many traditions of Hittite, Hattian, and Hurrian origin, the Hittites saw multiple paths to the same end. Thus they might seek to gain an answer to a particular question through dreams, the study of birds, the examination of the liver of a sacrificed animal, or an Old Woman casting an oracular lot.

Because the questions put were yes/no only, the question was asked repeatedly in different ways as well to be sure of the correct understanding of the gods' message.