Polytheism vs. monotheism
A socio-epistemic culture clash[1]

For *Melammu 2022*

Giorgio Buccellati
5/9/2023

Table of Contents

Melammu

The name of the "Melammu project," which hosts our publication, refers to a concept that is singularly pertinent to the point I wish to argue in my paper. *Melammu* is the divine

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splendor that unifies all the manifestations of the disparate gods and goddesses of the Mesopotamian pantheon, a shared attribute that points to a level of innumerability in a very numerable universe, that of the pan-theon, the sum total of all the deities addressed in the cult and defined in the myth.

I will push to the limits this unifying dimension of the concept. I will suggest that, in some respects, we can speak not so much of a clash between polytheism and monotheism, but rather between two contrasting views of monotheism. At the core of the argument there is an epistemic aspect, one that transcends those of myth and ritual. What I wish to stress is the human response to the notion of the absolute, and the way in which human knowledge in general is conditioned by this response: it is in this sense that I speak of an epistemic dimension. And this, in turn, is conditioned by the social setting within which this epistemic dimension developed.[2]

We may consider Mesopotamia as the broad cultural setting within which the biblical ethos would develop and with which it took issue. Now, that there is a difference, or indeed a clash, between the Mesopotamian and the biblical worldview is not in question. It is the nature and extent of this difference that is the subject of debate (to be considered in Part One), as well as the original genesis of the phenomenon (to be considered in Part Two).

PART ONE. THE CLASH: A REVISIONIST VIEW

1   Two monotheisms

To put it starkly, I suggest that we should recognize the existence of a Mesopotamian monotheism, alternatively, that we should speak of two monotheisms.

Let me qualify immediately this statement in a way that may make it sound less surprising. If we take literally the second part of the term, "-theism," then it is inappropriate to speak of a "Mesopotamian mono-theism": there are obviously many deities, and as many distinct activities and attributes ascribed to them, and just as many rituals with which they are brought into the sphere of human interaction.

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[2]I have developed some aspects of this theme in G. Buccellati, *When on High the Heavens. Mesopotamian Religion and Spirituality with Reference to the Biblical World.* Routledge 2023. For additional bibliographical information see *mes-rel.net*. Two recent books dealing with the origin and nature of the divine name Yahweh contribute to the discussion about the meaning and import of monotheism in ancient Israel: D. Fleming, *Yahweh before Isarel. Glimpses of Histoty in a Divine Name*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020; Robert D. Miller II, *Yahweh: Origin of a Desert God*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2021.

What I am pointing at is a different sphere of the divine or, if you will, of the "theistic" dimension, namely the sphere of the absolute, an absolute that is not empirically recognized, but is felt as a reality that conditions at the core human experience and knowledge. In this perspective, we may look at the elements that suggest both a consonance and a contrast between the Mesopotamian and the biblical ethos.

2   Consonance

2.1   (In)numerability: the absolute

The Mesopotamian notion of fate or destiny, *nam* in Sumerian and *šimtu* in Akkadian, is omnipresent, if opaque. To some extent, this is due to the fact that there is no mythology of fate or destiny as such (though it plays a passive role in some, as we shall see) nor is there any ritual or prayer addressed to it. It appears as an inert entity, deprived of any agency of its own. In some respects it is not subject to numeration, being as it is a reality that subsumes and determines the nature of things, animate and inanimate. It is true that it applies to individual elements of reality, being translated into the destiny of that particular element. The word occurs in fact often in the plural, *šimāti* in Akkadian, but it is not as if the fate or destiny of a given entity acquires an individuality of its own that can be juxtaposed to that of another; we do not have "destinies" the way we have gods or goddesses. The destiny of an individual entity is seen as the application of fate or destiny to a particular case.

Fate or destiny is thus the closest approximation to a conceptualization of the absolute in Mesopotamia. It appears as the matrix of reality, the code that defines the very nature of things, apart from any specific action that it might take. In fact, there is no possibility for fate or destiny to "act" in any independent manner, there is no expression of a given "will" on its part. It is there, as the underlying factor that conditions everything, but inertly, without any choice or decision on its part. When it is said that a given deity "determines a destiny" for a given person or thing it is in the sense of a judge who reaches a verdict, not a lawgiver who defines a law, much less a creator who posits something into being. The destiny is there, it is only a matter of identifying and assigning it.

It is in this recognition of fate or destiny as an absolute conditioning factor of all of reality that I used the term "monotheism." It is fate/destiny that appears in the Mesopotamian mindset as a single factor which, while it cannot be empirically faced and identified, can be so experienced because of the limits it poses on our ability to act. The gods and goddesses of the pantheon are subordinated to it as well, so it is in this sense that the term "monotheism" may be applicable: what is single ("mono") is an absolute which, while not properly "divine" in the sense this term applies to gods and goddesses, is as it were perceived as a

power above these gods and goddesses and in this sense effectively "divine," thus justifying the application of the term "theism."

2.2 Yearning: *Ludlul*

The Akkadian wisdom text known by its incipit as *Ludlul* ("Let me praise") opens an unexpected window onto a spiritual moment of the life of a diviner. It is the hymn to Marduk and describes a moment when the diviner, who gives us his name as *Šubšī-mešra-Šakkan* (thus adding an element of personal pathos to the text), sees that the omens on which he relies no longer seem to predict events as they are supposed to do ("my divinatory signs were confused and contradictory, every single day" i:52). He does not react as a technician who seeks to fix a problem, but rather as a person who bares open his deeper feelings of loss. And in his search, he seems to have a presentiment that fate may, after all, have a name, that "it" might be a "he" – Marduk.

The word for fate never appears in the text, and I am not saying that there is an explicit connection with fate, only that there is a yearning for it. However opaquely, there is a sense in which Marduk is not just the head of a hierarchical system, but is, somehow, ontologically different in the way in which he can redirect the whole divinatory system, from within. And there is a great emphasis on the experience, almost "mystical" (very much in quotes...), such as is typical of the later wisdom literature. I cannot develop here the theme[3]: I just propose it as a way to see a developing sensitivity, in the Mesopotamian ethos, for a new confrontation with fate, one that points in the direction of monotheism in the sense I have suggested.

3 Contrast

3.1 Predictability: divination

If the consonance between the two "monotheisms" lies primarily in the fact that the absolute, in its quality as fate or destiny, cannot be broken down into its component parts, there is at the same time a measure of contrast, in at least two respects. The first is that of predictability.

Divination may be seen as the mythology of fate. It is based on the notion that the work-

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[3]The theme is developed in detail in a chapter of my forthcoming book *Il pensiero nell'argilla. Analisi strutturale della letteratura mesopotamica. Jaca Book* On *Ludlul* see recently M. Piccin, "Vocabulary of Wisdom in Ludlul Bel Nemeqi and Babylonian Theodicy," in S. Günther, W. Horowitz and M. Widell (eds.), *Of Rabid Dogs, Hunchbacked Oxen, And Infertile Goats In Ancient Babylonia.* Studies Presented To Wu Yuhong on the Occasion of His 70th Birthday. Changchun: Institute for the History of Ancient Civilizations, 2021, pp. 147-79.

ings of fate and destiny are predictable on the basis of recurrent correlations among events: given a certain unusual pattern that has happened in the past, a pattern linking a certain observable phenomenon with a given event that took place in conjunction with it, one can predict that a future occurrence of the same phenomenon would entail the occurrence of the same event. It is a myth in the sense that it describes a situation in which fate is involved, making it possible for humans to interact with it.

Such predictability is in strong contrast with the sense of mystery that suffuses the biblical ethos. Here, a key dimension of the divine is the notion of the living God. This qualification is not in contrast with "dead" deities, but rather with the passive inertia that is so clearly in evidence with fate or destiny. The living God is intrinsically and essentially unpredictable, he could never be brought within the confines of divination because he is ontologically on a different plane.

3.2   Possession: *Anzu*

The second difference between the two "monotheisms" is a quality that fate or destiny has in the Mesopotamian mindset, namely the fact that it is intrinsically open to being "possessed."[4] The myth that describes this in detail is that of Anzu, an eagle that steals the "tablet of destinies" from Enlil and escapes with it to a faraway mountain, leaving the gods in a state of despair. Three aspects are particularly significant for our argument. The first is that there is no indication as to who may have written this tablet, nor concern about it: the tablet simply exists, and there is not even a thought that Anzu might want to rewrite it or add to it. This is in keeping with the inert nature of fate, which also exists, without any expression of will or agency on its part. – The second aspect is that Enlil, who was negligent about caring for the tablet, becomes a larva of himself once deprived of it: the tablet is thus as if an amulet, one that bestows power but without interacting with its possessor. – The third aspect is that the eventual victory of Ninurta against Anzu depends ultimately on a ruse as to how to use the nature (or "destiny") of the weapons so as to defeat the eagle in a way that is perfectly in line with the intended destiny of things.

The contrast with the biblical ethos in general is very sharp, and here I will only mention one narrative, which almost seems to have had the Anzu myth in mind, since it is so directly opposed to it. It is the episode of the tablets of the law on Mount Sinai . At first, it is

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[4]For an elaboration of this topic see G. Buccellati, "The Possession of Destiny in Mesopotamia. Thoughts about Anzu," in G. Matini, F. Nebiolo, P. Negri Scafa, S. Viaggio (eds.), *UMI ANNUTI LUHSUSAMMA ANA DARIŠ AJ AMŠI. Voglio pensare a questi giorni, e per sempre non dimenticare!* Studi in onore di Claudio Saporetti per il suo 85esimo compleanno. Roma: Write Up, 2023, pp. 51-66.

said that God himself writes the tablets with his own finger (Ex. 31:18): it is a fundamental difference, since here the author is at the center of the narrative and acts in the first person. But even more interesting is the fact that, when the tablets are smashed by Moses (Ex. 32:19), there is no outcry of any sort: the tablets are clearly in the background, they do not hold any special power of their own, and once smashed, they can be replaced, this time not even by God himself (Ex. 34:1): what matters is the author and his message, not the text in its physical consistency and appearance.

PART TWO. THE GENESIS: TWO SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT

When and how did this "clash" first occur? The question is relevant not only in historical terms, but also because it bears directly on the nature of the system itself – and it is very much in the center of biblical scholarship as it concerns the issue of the antiquity of the patriarchal narratives: can we consider it historically valid, or not?

We must note from the start that, in a Mesopotamian perspective, there is little question but that the mindset reflected in the biblical ethos is very, very late. Whether we place it in the second or the first millennium B.C., the Mesopotamian view precedes it by at least two millennia, not to mention the incomparably longer prehistoric horizons. So it is not that attributing historical merit to the patriarchal tradition, in particular, we gain much in terms of chronology. No matter what, the biblical view is simply extremely late.

The real issue is not one of chronology, as if one were to gain something by antedating by some centuries the start of the biblical view. It is rather one of epistemics: what is the setting that can best explain, epistemically, the origin of the "clash"? In other words, what were the conditions that allowed one to reach the new articulation of knowledge vis-à-vis the absolute? There are in this regard two main schools of thought, one that sees this setting as primarily in an intellectual perspective, and the other that sees it primarily in a social perspective.

4   An intellectual clash

4.1   The Babylonian exile

The prevalent opinion is that the Babylonian exile was the breeding ground for the flourishing of a major intellectual feat on the part of the exiles: the structuring of the canon but, beyond that, a whole new "invention" of the tradition.[5] Part of this refers to a core message of this tradition, namely the formalization of the monotheistic "doctrine," in ways that

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[5]For a recent statement in this regard see M. Liverani, *Oriente Occidente.* Bari: Laterza, 2021, especially chapter 19.

may have used older strands but in effect constituted a whole new construction of the basic thoughts about the divine reality and the manner in which one could, or should, relate to it.

It would then be here that we can see the historical split, or "clash," vis-à-vis the polytheistic mental universe as found in Mesopotamia. It is a confrontation that speaks to both the indebtedness to Mesopotamia of the Judean intellectuals in exile, and their departure from it. The harsh words of Psalm 137 (1.4.8-9): "On the rivers of Babylon, there we sat weeping... how can we sing the songs of Yahweh in a foreign land?... Daughter of Babylon, daughter of perdition, blessed is he who will pay you what you have done to us, blessed is he who will take your children only to crash them into the rock" – these words seem to speak of a certain memory of earlier times in the land of Judah, but would in fact be an idealized projection of that scenario accompanied by an exaggerate revulsion in front of that Babylon to which they, in fact, were indebted for their intellectual posture.

4.2 Two polytheisms

Seen in this light, the epistemic challenge faced by the Judean intellectuals in exile did not properly pertain to the Mesopotamian concern with fate, as I have outlined it earlier. Or rather, we may see it as if an answer to the yearning expressed in *Ludlul.* And, seen in this light, it remains at a level that is still in some way conditioned by the higher values of polytheism.

The epistemic dimension of polytheism is very significant.[6] It speaks to the intellectual urge to control reality by applying to it the analytical capacity whereby human knowledge sets up categories that define the known universe, and seeks to articulate the unknown and bring it into the realm of the known by extending the reach of its categorial power. Fragmenting the whole is the way through which we can control it. It is in this perspective that polytheism can be seen as a major intellectual feat, in that it assigns a categorial identity to the powers of nature (the sun, the sky) and to dimensions of the human psyche (wisdom, justice), and projects them into a realm that is deemed to have an operative power of its own, the gods and goddesses of the pantheon.

The achievement of the Judean exiles, in the perspective I have just outlined, is in line with this intellectual posture. It proposes a rarefaction of the multiplicity, in a way that is not dissimilar to what had already been experimented with in earlier times, something which has been termed "henotheism." The Judean intellectuals go one step beyond, in that they place this one god at a level that is qualitatively higher than the deities recognized in

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[6]In this I take a very different stand from the one advocated by M. Bettini, *In Praise of Polyutheism*, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2023.

the pantheon: he is not a supreme god (something that has been termed summo-theism), he is rather one of a kind, his own unique kind.

But if this god is still seen only as the rarefied version of the fragments (the gods and goddesses), he remains somehow tied to numerability. This view of the genesis of monotheism as an intellectual feat conditions our understanding of the very nature of monotheism. It rather is, in this light, a *mutant polytheism* or a *polytheism of one.* It is a different way of numbering, but it does not really propose an alternative to fate seen as the absolute. The clash lies in the way in which one looks at numerability, but does not effectively go beyond it.

4.3   Ancient historiography

We should stress that the ancient Mesopotamians had a very limited knowledge of their earlier history, not to mention the prehistory. There was a certain sense of continuity, which was expressed for example in the king lists, in the copying of older texts, in the interest for maintaining ancient buildings. But our own knowledge and understanding of their remote past is incomparably better than theirs – a point that needs to be kept well in mind when we seek to divest ourselves of the privilege of our distance in order to let the ancients speak for themselves.

How and where the Judean intellectuals in exile would have found, in Mesopotamia, inspiration, not to mention material, to construct the vast painting of their supposedly imagined past poses a serious problem, and needs more careful reflection than seems to have been accorded it thus far. Some of the details given in the biblical narratives about the earliest history fit so well in what *we* now know about this early history that they cannot simply be attributed to a sheer invention out of nothing. To illustrate this, we will turn to one particular point that has a bearing on our current argument, namely the patriarchal tradition which is presented, in the biblical narrative, as the birth place of monotheism.

5   A social clash

Seen in this light, the epistemic dimension of monotheism emerges primarily as rooted in a social, rather than an intellectual, clash. Let us look briefly at its setting from a Mesopotamian point of view.

5.1   The Amorites

It is well known that, in the early part of the second millennium B.C., a major transformation takes place in the socio-political scene of Mesopotamia, one that is linked to a spe-

cific group of people, the Amorites.[7] Links between these movements and the patriarchal traditions have been noted for a long time, and it remains an enduring subject of study. My perspective is at variance with the mainstream. My approach depends not only on the texts, but also on a long frequentation of the landscape of the steppe.

Geography is relevant, and living the landscape helps in relating to the historical events which it conditioned. My point, then, is that the steppe was wholly inadequate to serve as a springboard for a sustained movement, presumably originating there, of non-sedentary people responsible for recurrent forays into the sedentary zone, for a period of several centuries. They were only partly non-sedentary, and to fully appreciate this, one should be mindful of the geographical and human landscape as it is today, exhibiting a modern use of the steppe which is very plausibly still close to that of the ancients.

I view this phenomenon as the expansion of the peasant classes of the middle Euphrates who found ways to establish a new control over the vast territory of the steppe, taking off from the narrow corridor of the agricultural land which could be irrigated from the banks of the Euphrates. The steppe offered then, as it offers today, ample pasture land in the winter months and provided then, as it provides today, an ample resource of brackish water, accessible only a few meters below the topsoil through wells that could easily be dug and used as permanent watering places for the herds, while a few oases provided drinking water for humans. Having turned agro-pastoralists from simple farmers that they were, these groups acquired a sense of autonomy and eventually of independence that gave them new power vis-à-vis the state control of the cities located in the narrow fertile corridor of the Euphrates. Their dialect was in effect an archaic form of Akkadian, which had developed in the urban setting.

5.2   The patriarchal tradition

Many aspects of the biblical narrative fit well into this picture, with such a measure of detail that it is difficult to see how they could be ascribed to a mere coincidence had they been simply invented. This pertains to a number of different features, such as personal names, life ways, symbols. It also presents a singular view of urban Mesopotamia, as an example of which we may mention the Tower of Babel episode (Gen. 11:1-9). No city dweller would have thought of the ziggurat in the terms presented in the biblical episode: the high

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[7]See recently M. SIlver (Lönnqvist), "SYGIS – The Anatomy of the Jebel Bishri Project in Syria. Remote Sensing, Archaeological Surveying, Mapping and GIS Studies with Education in Syria," in M. Silver (ed.), *Challenges, Strategies And High-Tech Applications For Saving The Cultural Heritage Of Syria.* Proceedings Of The Workshop Held At The 10th ICAANE In Vienna, April 2016. Oriental and European Archaeology: Volume 21, Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences, 2022. pp. 57-81.

structure was not meant to scale heaven, but rather to give a worthy abode to a deity; and the multitude of languages would have been seen as boon, not as a curse: it meant that there was long distance traffic, and interpreters and dictionaries would have taken care of the difficulty in communicating – whereas, for someone stranded in the steppe, inability to communicate would indeed have been an insurmountable problem. Nor was divination possible in the steppe, without the benefit of of all the technical know how that it entailed.

It is in this context that I see the singling out of fate as the major feature of the Mesopotamian mindset to which these agro-pastoralists, away from the support structure of urban religion, could relate. Far away from temples and rituals, from technicians of cult and diviners, an agro-pastoralist would more easily have related to the notion that fate, this singular perception of the absolute, could in fact be endowed with an agency all its own, and be felt as a relatable "Thou" instead of an impersonal "It." This is then a plausible setting for the birth of a new awareness of the nature and meaning of a wholly new point of reference, an absolute which (or rather "who," in their new perspective) would inescapably condition human life. If so, the clash is rooted not in the speculation of a group of intellectuals , but in the social distancing of a particular agro-pastoralist group from its urban roots, a clash that had profound epistemic consequences in that it gave a thoroughly new dimension to the perception of the absolute.

5.3   Epic memory

There are at least two major difficulties with this interpretation.[8]

The first is that there is no trace whatsoever of any form of monotheism (in any sense of the term) in any of the sources relating to the Amorites. A possible explanation is that the Amorites we know from Mesopotamian sources had remained in close contact with the urban centers that controlled the villages from which they came. When back in the valley floor, in the *zôr*, they would be able to rely on the diviners just as they could rely on scribes to write contracts for the properties they owned. They did claim autonomy when in the steppe, but remained fully integrated with their own land of origin: the "agro-" part of the term "agro-pastoralist" is as germane to them as the second part of the term ("pastoralist"). It is plausible to assume, however, that certain groups gained an ever greater distance from their urban origins, and attained in the process an equally ever greater sense of autonomy and detachment, a process that wold have reached even greater ascendancy as a result of

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[8]On this see G. Buccellati, "From Khana to Laqê. The End of Syro-Mesopotamia," in Ö. Tunça (ed.), *De la Babylonie à la Syrie, en passant par Mari*. Mélanges offerts à Monsieur J.-R. Kupper à l'occasion de son 70e anniversaire. Liège: Université de Liège, 1990, pp. 229-253, and "I1 secondo millennio a.C. nella memoria epica di Giuda e Israele," in *Rivista teologica di Lugano*, 9 (2004) 521-543.

the growing de-urbanization of the mid Euphrates valley in the middle of the second millennium. Evidence for this may be seen in the fact that a kingdom of "Amurru" did in fact get established in the second half of the second millennium, its core being in the center of the steppe (Palmyra) and extending progressively toward the coast. It would then be one of these groups that would have come to be depicted in the biblical narrative.

This would bear also on the second problem, which is that of the transmission of this tradition from the early second millennium to the time in the first millennium when it would have become crystallized in the form we have it today. The solution I have proposed is that such a splinter group, as I have just mentioned would have eventually come to be at home in the western part of the steppe, along the model of the kingdom of Amurru which was based in the core area of the steppe (around Palmyra), emerging as the first real steppe kingdom, extending its control all the way to the Mediterranean. Again, not in the sense that one can find any trace of monotheism in the kingdom of Amurru, but only in terms of the trajectory westward that this movement implies. It was an epic memory that the small group associated with the name of Abraham would have carried to Palestine where it found concrete shape in its final written embodiment.

CONCLUSION. AN ENDURING CLASH

To conclude we may draw attention to two aspects of my presentation that are especially pertinent for our *Melammu* context.

The first pertains to the subtitle of the Fifteenth Symposium: *Sedentary and non-sedentary populations*. The picture I have drawn presents an unexpected aspect of this relationship: the social setting of an agro-pastoralist group, having become, if only on the fringes, fully pastoralist and thus fully non-sedentary (at least for certain periods of time), serves as the breeding ground for a wholly new epistemic posture, one that the progressive development of human control over nature, from the earliest prehistory to the start of urban civilization, had just as progressively come to discard, a posture that recognizes the value of the whole over that of analytical fragmentation. The perception of fate reinterpreted as a personal entity may rightfully be seen as a major epistemic event. The whole was then seen precisely as a whole, one that was not subject to numeration and resistant to all attempts at fragmentation – and yet fully within the range of human understanding, in the same way that human personal relationships fall within the realm of understanding even while they cannot, in their ultimate value, be brought under the lens of analytical control. It is not the kind of contribution we would normally expect from a non-sedentary group.

The second aspect takes us back to the words from the Melammu charter: "the [Melam-

mu] Project is also interested in how Mesopotamian and Ancient Near Eastern culture lives on and has influenced the modern world." As I have endeavored to show, the call to remain open to the impact of the whole has remained consistently relevant throughout the centuries, and is more than ever claiming our attention today, at a time when the cybernetic turn is pushing again in the opposite direction.[9] This is indeed very significant even apart from the religious dimension which has been seen, by countless generations, as a coherent development of awareness for fate perceived as a personal agent, the "living God" of the Bible.

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[9]This is the central theme of our Balzan research project entitled precisely *Cybernetica Mesopotamica.* for which se cyb-mes.net.