

Prof. Scott B. Noegel
Chair, Dept. of Near Eastern Languages and Civilization
University of Washington

“Greek Religion and the Ancient Near East.”

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CHAPTER ONE

Greek Religion and the Ancient Near East

Scott B. Noegel

In fact, the names of nearly all the gods came to Hellas from Egypt. For I am convinced by inquiry that they have come from foreign parts, and I believe that they came chiefly from Egypt.

(Herodotus, 2.50.1, ca. 450 BC)

The historical relationship between Greek religion and the ancient Near East is one that scholars have pondered, investigated, and debated for many years. Approaches to the subject have ranged from the merely suggestive to the fiercely polemical. At the heart of the subject is a question of cultural influence; that is to say, whether striking similarities in the textual, artistic, and archaeological remains constitute evidence for Near Eastern influence on Greek culture or whether one can account for affinities by seeing them as independent developments. It is into this larger context of cultural influence that one must place discussions of Greek religion and the ancient Near East.

In their outward forms, at least, Aegean religions appear very similar to those in the Near East. In both, for example, one finds cult images, altars and sacrifices, libations and other ritual practices, sanctuaries, temples and temple functionaries, laws and ethics, prayer, hymns, incantations, curses, cultic dancing, festivals, divination, ecstasy, seers, and oracles. Other shared features include the existence of divinities and demons of both genders, an association of gods with cosmic regions, notions of the sacred, and concepts of pollution, purification, and atonement. However, since one can find these features in religious traditions that had no contact with the Aegean or the Near East it is possible that they represent independent developments. On the other hand, their presence elsewhere does not necessarily rule out the possibility that they are the result of cultural influence. As some classicists have pointed out, Near Eastern influence is the most likely explanation for some elements – certain purification rituals, the sacrificial use of scapegoats, and foundation deposits – to name just a few. But how and when did such elements make their way to the Greek world? Such questions are not easily answered.

For centuries, questions of influence were intimately bound up with perspectives of privilege. Scholarship of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries often took it for granted that “Greece” was the font of western civilization. Informed by Romantic

nationalism and, in part, by the racism associated with it, it understood the “genius” of Greek civilization as marking the end of antiquity and the start of a “miracle” that “anticipated the Enlightenment by breaking with myth, tradition, and puerile superstition to achieve a critical view of religion” (Lincoln 2004:658). The Near East represented all that was “barbarian” and “pagan.” Consequently, looking eastward for evidence of contact and influence remained a largely peripheral enterprise. A few scholars offered challenges to the dominant paradigm (Astour 1965; Bérard 1902–3; Brown 1898; Farnell 1911; Gordon 1956, 1962, 1966, 1967; Wirth 1921), but their works went largely unnoticed by classicists. Recent decades have seen this paradigm shift, but it has not shifted without a good deal of controversy and disciplinary polemic (Bernal 1987, 1990, 1991, 2001; Lefkowitz 1996a, 1996b).

Today, it is fair to say that a consensus view among classicists and Near Eastern scholars admits of some East-to-West influence. Yet vital questions remain. How much and what kind of influence are we speaking of? How early does this influence occur? And how does one differentiate evidence for mere contact from evidence for influence? Responses to these questions have been hotly debated, and typically they have fallen along disciplinary lines, with classicists seeing Near Eastern influence as largely intermittent until the late archaic and classical periods (Burkert 1992, 2004, 2005a; Scheid 2004) and Near Eastern scholars (and a few classicists: Morris 1992, 2001; Walcot 1966; West 1995, 1997) pushing for greater influence and earlier dates (Burstein 1996; Dalley and Reyes 1998a; Naveh 1973; Redford 1992; Talon 2001). Influence in both directions is generally accepted for the hellenistic period and later (Kuhrt 1995; Linszen 2004).

The question of Near Eastern influence would appear to be difficult enough to answer were it not for a series of more recent challenges that have come from a variety of disciplines. Anthropologists, for example, have drawn attention to the modern western biases that inform the very question of influence. Historians of religion ask what is meant by “influence” in a world of constant mutual contact and exchange. Classicists too are now urging us to consider what preconditions make any cultural exchange a possibility and to define with greater rigor the modalities of transmission in both directions (Johnston 1999a; Raaflaub 2000). Other scholars question whether one can legitimately speak about “religion” in cultures that possess no corresponding word for it. Indeed, some wonder whether any proposed taxonomy for religion can account for its inherent diversity and plurality of forms, or whether any taxonomy can be free from ideology (Smith 2004:169, 171–2, 179). Terms like “cult,” “sacrifice,” and “ritual,” whose definitions had long been taken for granted, have now become focal points for theoretical debate and redefinition (Bremmer 2004; Burkert 1983; Girard 1977; Hubert and Mauss 1964; Rappaport 1979; Smith 2004:145–59; Versnel 1993:16–89).

The label “Near East” also has become increasingly problematic for some scholars when discussing religion. For one thing, the phrase masks under a single rubric dozens of diverse peoples and cultures. Though there is some heuristic utility in dividing the Near East into several cultural zones, scholars find it extremely difficult to speak generally of “religion” in Egypt, Syro-Canaan, Israel, Anatolia, or Mesopotamia alone, each of which possessed countless religions of infinite variety at family, village, and state levels (Hornung 1971; Morenz 1973; Oppenheim 1977; J. Smith 2003; Zevit 2001). Moreover, implicit in the classification “Near East” is a

geographical perspective that can be defined only by its relation to the West. Thus, for some it has become problematic at best and “orientalist” at worst (Said 1978). For similar reasons, many classicists have begun to avoid employing the anachronistic term “Greek” when discussing the many disparate Aegean cultures of antiquity and opt instead for more localized and accurate terms such as “Athenian,” “Spartan,” and the like.

Given such difficulties, scholars typically have approached the subject of “Greek religion and the ancient Near East” in one of three overlapping ways, each of which depends on the scholar’s definition of religion and view concerning the general comparability of religious traditions. The first approach examines the subject by remaining attentive to the particular times, places, and cultural contexts of each religion under investigation. It aims to identify cases in which specific religious practices and beliefs are adopted, adapted, and transformed when cultures come into contact (Brown 1995, 2000, 2001; Dotan 2003; Faraone 1993, 1995, 2002; Frankfurter 1998; Noegel 1998, 2004; Toorn 1985, 1997). The second approach adopts a more holistic and comparative vantage, and seeks to ascertain whether a comparative enterprise is justified by identifying trends, issues, and features that unite the various religions of the “Mediterranean world” (Graf 2004b; D.P. Wright 2004a). The third approach sees value in comparing the various religions of the world regardless of their historical and cultural contexts. It is interested less in identifying cases of influence and exchange than in removing the study of all religions from their relative academic isolation (Eliade 1959, 1969; Mondi 1990).

Regardless of which approach one adopts, those pursuing the study of “Greek religion and the ancient Near East” must consign themselves to sorting through and interpreting an unwieldy and thorny mass of textual, artistic, and archaeological evidence. It is, of course, impossible to treat such a vast array of information adequately here. Therefore, I shall focus the discussion on four problems that are central to any investigation: (1) myths, rituals, and cults; (2) the vehicles of cultural transmission; (3) shared taxonomies and the problem of cultural exchange; and (4) monotheisms, monolatries, henotheisms, and polytheisms.

Myths, Rituals, and Cults

It is not surprising that some mythological traditions should have crossed geographic and cultural boundaries. After all, the ancient world was highly cosmopolitan, interactive, and multilingual (Sasson 2005). Some myths were widely known in antiquity. The epic of Gilgamesh, for example, was translated into a number of languages. Cuneiform tablets discovered at Amarna in Egypt that date to the fourteenth century BC reveal their scribes to have been acquainted with a number of Mesopotamian mythological traditions, including those of Adapa, Nergal, and Ereshkigal. They also offer direct evidence for close contacts between Egypt, Mesopotamia, Crete, Cyprus, Anatolia, and the city-states of Syro-Canaan. Though the tablets record no correspondence with Mycenae it is likely that perishable materials now lost, like papyrus, leather, and wood, also served as media for correspondence. Indeed, evidence for Mycenae’s international contacts comes from a cache of Mesopotamian cylinder seals discovered at Thebes (Porada 1981) and from the very word for Egypt

in Mycenaean Greek (*a-i-ku-pu-ti-jo*, later Greek *Aigyptos*), which derives from the Egyptian words *ḥwt-k3-ptḥ* (lit. “Temple of Ptah”) applied metonymically to all of Egypt.

In the early part of the last century classicists pointed to the existence of a number of parallels between Aegean mythologies and those found in biblical, Egyptian, and Mesopotamian texts (Brown 1898; Frazer 1921), but often these comparisons lacked methodological sophistication and relied too heavily upon broad thematic similarities. More recent studies demonstrate a greater awareness of the limits of the comparative method, but also a greater appreciation for what shared mythological elements imply (or do not imply) about intercultural contact and the diffusion of ideas (Burkert 1987b; Graf 2004a; N. Marinatos 2001; Mondi 1990; Penglase 1994; West 1995, 1997).

The works of Hesiod and Homer, in particular, have been brought into close dialogue with the great epics of Anatolia, Mesopotamia, Syro-Canaan, and, less often, Egypt (Bachvarova 2002, 2005; Langdon 1990; N. Marinatos 2001; Noegel 2002, 2005a). It is now appropriate to speak of an “Asiatic mythological *koinē*” and its formative impact on the Aegean literatures of the Bronze and Iron Ages (Graf 2004a; cf. “Aegean *koinē*” in Burkert 1985, 1992, but “Near Eastern-Aegean cultural community [*koinē*]” in Burkert 2005a:291).

Such a *koinē*, scholars suggest, explains the parallels that exist between Aegean and Near Eastern mythological conceptions concerning creation, cosmology, the gods, humankind, death, and the afterlife (Astour 1998; West 1995). In some cases, the mythological parallels are so geographically and temporally widespread that any effort to trace their westward movement with precision is impossible. Such is the case with the story of the world deluge. It is attested in a number of Sumerian, Akkadian, Greek, and Indian sources, and of course in the biblical story of Noah (Genesis 6–9). Another is that of a battle between a god or hero and many-headed serpent representing chaos. One finds this theme in mythological texts from Anatolia, Egypt, Ugarit, and Israel (Isaiah 27:1; Psalms 74:12–14). Its appearance in a variety of Greek myths, including those of Heracles and Jason and the Argonauts (Watkins 1994), clearly represents eastern influence even though the exact path of transmission cannot be known.

In some cases the parallels appear to be so close that they suggest literary borrowing. For example, the Hittite myth of the “Kingship of Heaven” involves the violent severing of Heaven’s penis in a way that recalls the castration of Uranus in Hesiod’s *Theogony*. Also reminiscent of the *Theogony* is the Hittite “Song of Ullikumi” in which a weather-god defeats a usurper deity in a way remarkably similar to the manner in which Zeus defeats Typhon (Burkert 2005a:295–6).

Mesopotamian myths also have provided a number of conspicuous parallels. Some of the closest have been those that connect Hesiod’s *Theogony* and the Babylonian creation story Enūma Elish. Both texts, for example, describe how the commingling of the Sky and the Earth resulted in the birth of the gods. Other close parallels include those that link portions of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* with the Atrahasis epic and the epic of Gilgamesh (Abusch 2001; Burkert 1991, 1992:88–93, 2005a; Rollinger 1996; West 1997). Well-known examples of the latter include the similarities between Achilles’ speech to his dead friend Patroclus and Gilgamesh’s speech to his deceased comrade Enkidu. Also remarkable are parallels that connect the account of

Gilgamesh's refusal of Ishtar's sexual advances to Homer's treatment of Aphrodite and Anchises. The evidence for literary borrowing that these motifs and thematic parallels provide, and there are many more than can be elaborated upon here, is bolstered by additional similarities in style and compositional structure (Morris 1997). There can no longer be any doubt that at least some of these parallels are the result of contact with the Near East.

Nevertheless, though striking, the value of such parallels for the comparative study of Aegean and Near Eastern religions remains difficult to gauge. Much depends on how one defines myth (or epic: Edmunds 2005) and its relation to ritual and the cult. In previous years, ancient mythologies were generally understood as scripts for ritual performances that served to ensure fertility and the continuance of the agricultural cycle (Hooke 1933; Malinowski 1926). Inspiring this model, in part, was the knowledge that *Enūma Elish* was recited on the fourth day of the Babylonian New Year (*akītu*) festival (Bidmead 2002). The Hittite story of the combat between the weather-god and the serpent Illuyanka similarly informs us that it was recited during the Hattic New Year (*purulli*) festival (Beckman 2005:257). Such texts and their proposed purposes have historically been used as templates for understanding the function of Aegean mythological texts.

Most scholars today would consider it naive to ascribe to all cultures such a relationship between myths and rituals. There are simply too many cultural differences that inform the meaning of both myth and ritual. It is clear that Aegean peoples did not consider the *Theogony* or the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* "sacred texts" in the same way that Mesopotamians understood *Enūma Elish* (Hultgard 2004), even if later Greek writers did consider them formative for defining the hellenic pantheon (Herodotus 2.53). We also have no evidence that Aegean mythological texts were ever enacted or recited during cultic events, and even if one concedes that some Aegean myths played such a role (e.g., *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*), it is probable that their relationship to the cult was understood differently in Mesopotamia (Lambert 1968). Few scholars of the Near East maintain today that *Enūma Elish* and the account of Illuyanka scripted the ritual events of their respective New Year festivals. Nevertheless, most do understand Mesopotamian myths and rituals to be tightly connected, in that the myths served as a liturgical means of reifying the cosmological importance of the ritual events. They point out that even when ritual texts invoke mythological references they do so only to establish divine precedent. Such evidence suggests that the relationship between myths and rituals may have been closer in Mesopotamia and Anatolia than in the Aegean world.

What, then, is the relationship between Aegean myths and rituals? Scholars have had an extremely difficult time answering this question (Fontenrose 1966). One of the reasons for this is that the descriptions of religious rituals found in the Homeric epics are highly stylized and therefore do not resemble the actual ritual practices of any historical period. There are some exceptions to this, such as the mantic praxis depicted in the so-called "Book of the Dead" (*Odyssey* 11), which shares affinities with Hittite necromancy rituals (Steiner 1971). But on the whole, Homer's treatment of rituals tends to be generalized. In addition, the Homeric epics were so well known that they could have influenced the ways in which later rituals were performed, and the ways in which artists and philosophers imagined religion (Mikalson 2004b:211).

Another reason why establishing the relationship between Aegean myths and rituals has proven so difficult is that there appears to be little agreement amongst scholars as to how to define ritual (Bremmer 2004; Versnel 1993:16–89). Inspired by a variety of theoretical perspectives (e.g., structuralist, psychological, sociological, ideological), many new ways for understanding the meaning and origins of myth also have emerged (Burkert 1983, 1985; Csapo 2005; Graf 2004a). Regardless of one's methodological approach, it seems fairly obvious to most scholars that some structural affinities exist between myths and rituals generally. Nevertheless, it appears that the only safe generalization about myth is that it often serves an apologetic function providing belief systems, and thus ritual practices, with divinely sanctioned etiologies (Graf 2004a).

All this makes it extremely difficult to use comparative Aegean and Near Eastern mythology as evidence for the diffusion of religious traditions. Certainly cultic diffusion must lie behind many of the parallels, but until scholars can clarify with greater precision the relationship between mythology and ritual practice in the Near East and in the Aegean world, we must see Near Eastern mythology primarily as a stimulus to the Greek poetic tradition and, according to some scholars, even to philosophy (Thomas 2004; West 1995:41–2).

The Vehicles of Cultural Transmission

Another problem that remains central to the investigation of “Greek religion and the ancient Near East” is that of the vehicles of cultural transmission. Simply put, how were religious ideas and practices transmitted from the civilizations of the Near East to the Aegean? And who transmitted them? As one might imagine, many factors, including trade and commerce, warfare, migration, exile, foreign employment, religious festivals, and diplomacy, are likely to have created contexts for exchange (Dalley 1998). Unfortunately, the textual, artistic, and archaeological evidence is too fragmentary to provide a detailed picture of how these factors enabled religious exchange in each historical period. Nevertheless, it does allow us to recognize the importance of all of them throughout the history of the Aegean world. Even a cursory survey of the evidence reveals a long history of nearly constant international exchange by land and sea (Astour 1995; Bass 1995), which is likely to have stimulated exchange among the region's diverse religious traditions.

It is generally recognized that, during the Bronze Age, the Minoan civilization of Crete played a formative role in shaping the cultural contours of what was later to become Mycenaean Greece (Burkert 1985:19–22). However, it is also known that the Minoan civilization was itself greatly shaped by contacts with Egypt and with the civilizations of the eastern Mediterranean, including Mesopotamia (Cline 1987, 1991, 1994; N. Marinatos 1993; Redford 1992:242–3). In early scholarship, Minoan religion was typically referred to as a “primitive” form of “fertility worship” that focused primarily on a “Great Mother Goddess.” Today, however, scholars see the Minoan religious system as far more complex, resembling the sophisticated cults of the Near East (Marinatos 1993).

Yet despite international influences, Minoan Crete was not a carbon copy of Near Eastern polities. It did not represent Near Eastern culture any more than it

represented “the first high European culture” (Burkert 2005a:292). It was an island culture of its own making and it was highly influential. Wonderfully preserved Minoan frescoes on the island of Thera, for example, demonstrate the extent of their presence in the region and depict their travels to North Africa (S. Marinatos 1973). The palace walls of the Hyksos capital of Avaris (Tel el-Daba’) in the sixteenth century BC reveal the presence of Minoan artisans (Marinatos 1998), as do palace reliefs at Mari, on the mid-Euphrates, Qatna in Syria, and Tel Kabri in Israel.

The material culture of Mycenae, from its vaulted tombs to its mountain sanctuaries, gives conclusive evidence for the imprint of Cretan religious traditions – so much so that many classicists find it difficult to differentiate Minoan religion from that of Mycenae. Nevertheless, one must rely entirely upon the artistic and archaeological record of Crete in order to understand Minoan religion. No one has yet been able to decipher convincingly the Minoan scripts in use from 1850 to 1450 BC (i.e., Cretan hieroglyphic, Linear A, and Cypro-Minoan). Linear B, the script in use after the thirteenth century BC, was used to record an early form of Greek. A period of intermittent destruction separates Linear B from the earlier scripts. Nevertheless, the apparent rupture and change of script do not correlate to massive changes in Minoan culture, for many aspects of the so-called “Minoan–Mycenaean religion” appear to have survived the transition (Nilsson 1950). Despite an influx of Mycenaean settlers after this period, Minoan culture remained distinctively Minoan (Knapp 1995:1442).

While much attention has focused on Crete, in part owing to its later connections to mainland Mycenae, the Mediterranean archaeological record attests to a much larger network of maritime powers during the Bronze Age.

The Egyptians had enjoyed a long and ubiquitous presence on the Mediterranean. Egypt’s close commercial and cultural connections to Syria, especially the city of Byblos, meant that it had to protect its interests there. The conflicts that ensued between Egypt and the Hittite kingdom during the fourteenth to thirteenth centuries BC are a fitting demonstration of Egypt’s protective interest in the Levant. Not only were some Egyptians (probably merchants) living in various cities of Syria and the Levant, as well as on Cyprus, some Aegean peoples (also probably merchants) were living in Egypt (Dothan 1995:1273). There they doubtless were exposed to Egyptian religious practices and beliefs.

Mycenaean wares found at the seaport of Ugarit (modern Ras Shamra, in Syria) show that exchanges between Mycenaeans and the peoples of the eastern edges of the Mediterranean were close and frequent (Langdon 1989). Ongoing trade with Mycenae would have provided opportunities for the introduction of Syria’s many gods (in fact Ugaritic offering lists name more than one hundred gods: D.P. Wright 2004b:174). As illustrated by the Bronze Age shipwreck discovered at Ulu Burun off the coast of southern Turkey, the peoples of Syro-Canaan were long engaged in the transport of cargo from Egypt to Mesopotamia, Cyprus, the Levant, and the Aegean (Bass 1989). Such a context offered numerous occasions for cultural exchange.

Bronze Age Cyprus was also a cosmopolitan place. There is evidence for Hittites, Semites, Hurrians, Egyptians, and Aegean peoples all living on the island. Because of its proximity to the Syrian coast, its material culture appears to have shared more in common with the lands to the East. Nevertheless, because it was a vital source of copper, its contacts reached far West as well. Though our knowledge of Bronze Age

Cypriote religions is scant, the settlement of so many diverse peoples must have brought many different traditions into contact.

The sum total of evidence makes it clear that the Bronze Age Mediterranean was far more interactive than is often portrayed in textbooks. Indeed, we must envision it as a maritime world in which people from Crete, Cyprus, Sardinia, Rhodes, Thera, the city-states of Syria and the Levant, and, of course, Egypt enjoyed strong commercial and cultural ties. It is safe to assume that when these peoples took to the water they took their religious traditions along with them (Brody 1998).

Of course, sea trade was not the only means of cultural transmission during the Bronze Age. Religious festivals, known especially from Anatolia, also provided opportunities for contact between Hurrian, Hittite, and Aegean bards, performers, and cultic personnel (Bachvarova forthcoming). Such festivals accompanied the transport of divine statues from one region to another. The two bronze "smiting gods" found at the Mycenaean site of Phylakopi on Melos may be placed into this context. The Mycenaeans also imported an Anatolian goddess, whom they called "Potnia Aswiya." Evidence suggests that her cultic officials and rituals accompanied her (Bachvarova forthcoming; Morris 2001). Though Hittite religion appears to have synthesized Hattic and Hurrian traditions (McMahon 1995:1983), it must be kept in mind that scribes who wrote Akkadian had long lived at Hattusha and had promoted Mesopotamian learning there (Beckman 1983). Since Akkadian education consisted of learning the epic religious texts, we may see Anatolia as a conduit for the westward movement of Mesopotamian religious ideas as well.

As a consequence of the catastrophes that led to, or resulted from, the invasions of the "Sea Peoples," palace life in the Mediterranean came to an abrupt end in the twelfth century BC, plunging the Aegean world into a "dark age" (Sandars 1978). It is, of course, "dark" only to us because next to nothing survives from this period that might shed light on it – written records, for example, appear to vanish. Nevertheless, archaeological finds found on certain sites on the periphery of Egyptian and Neo-Hittite control show that contacts between the Aegean and Anatolia (especially Lydia) and Syria were not cut off entirely and that, though radically altered, international maritime trade did not cease (Muhly 2003; Sherratt 2003).

It is into this context that we must place the coastal peoples of Syro-Canaan (especially Tyre, Sidon, and Byblos), whom Greek texts (but no native sources) refer to as "Phoenicians" (Burstein 1996; Stern 2003). Their ubiquitous maritime, mercantile, and colonial activities made them enormously influential throughout the Mediterranean world (Noegel 2005b). Already by the end of the twelfth century BC, the rulers of Tyre and Sidon, often with Assyrian encouragement, had re-established the trading links that once connected the Aegean world to the cities of the East (Frankenstein 1979). But their expansion did not stop there. In the years that followed, Tyre extended its presence primarily in a southern direction into Palestine and North Africa, though Tyrian enclaves are also in evidence at Carthage and Cyprus and further north at Carchemish. Sidon, on the other hand, moved north into Anatolia, Cilicia, Aramaea, and Assyria, and west to Crete, Cyprus, Sardinia, Sicily, and Spain. Contacts between Phoenician and Aegean centers were clearly very close since early in this period Greek speakers adopted and adapted the Phoenician alphabet (Naveh 1973), although possibly through Aramaean intermediaries. As demonstrated by dedicatory inscriptions devoted to the goddess Astarte of Sidon in Spain and

Cyprus, the religions of the distinctive Phoenician city-states were transported with them (Ribichini 1999; Stern 2003).

Another result of the upheavals of the twelfth century BC was the settlement in Canaan of the Philistines. Textual, artistic, and archaeological evidence shows that the Philistines were Aegean in origin (Dothan 1995; cf. Morris 2003). They are listed and depicted, for example, along with a number of others, as one of the "Sea Peoples," on reliefs at the mortuary temple of Ramesses III (1187–1156 BC) at Medinet Habu. The reliefs depict pharaoh's victory over them during a naval battle fought on Egypt's coast. Additional documents inform us that after the war the "Sea Peoples" settled on the Levantine coast. Excavations at Philistine sites, especially Ashdod, Ekron, and Tel Qasile, show them to have been highly advanced, especially in farming, building, metallurgy, and the production of olive oil. Their religious cults included Aegean, Canaanite, Cypriot, and Egyptian elements. A dedicatory inscription to a goddess (perhaps named Potnia) found at Ekron and written in a locally adapted Phoenician-type script similarly illustrates the complex culture of the Philistines (Noegel 2005c). The cult and inscription also demonstrate how mutually influential intercultural contact was early in the second millennium.

From the eighth century BC, a period coinciding with a "renaissance" of "Greek religion" (Mikalson 2004b:212), peoples of the Aegean came into increasing contact with Assyrians when the Assyrian king Tilglath-Pileser III (744–727 BC) expanded his presence northward, defeating the kingdom of Urartu, and westward, taking control of Byblos and Tyre (Rollinger 2001). Shortly after these conquests, the city-states of Syria informed the Assyrian king that they were under attack by a people they called "Ionians" (whom some scholars see as a more general reference to the peoples of Euboea, Athens, Samos, and Naxos [Burkert 1992:13]). Tilglath-Pileser III's expansionist policies were continued by his successors Shalmaneser V (726–722 BC) and Sargon II (721–705 BC). The latter seized control of the Hittite city-states of Carchemish, Cilicia, and Zinjirli in the late eighth century BC, causing the kings of Paphos and Salamis in Cyprus to recognize his suzerainty and send gifts.

In the early seventh century BC the Assyrian king Sennacherib (704–681 BC) defeated the Ionians in a decisive naval battle. Soon afterwards, however, contact continued through the Assyrian royal house and its ambassadors (Parpola 2003), as well as merchants, artisans, and others who were eager to maintain Assyrian hegemony and entrepreneurial interests in the region. After securing his power in the region, Sennacherib instituted a policy of encouraging foreign trade and settlement on lands that he had thoroughly annexed (Lafranchi 2000). This policy extended his reach deep into the Aegean. Berossus tells us that Sennacherib even inscribed his achievements on bronze statues and placed them in Athens in a temple especially constructed for them (Dalley and Reyes 1998a:98). Though we cannot confirm the reference, the discovery of Mesopotamian bronze statues at temples in Athens, Delphi, Olympia, Rhodes, and Samos argues in favor of its credibility (Curtis 1994).

A little more than a generation after Sennacherib, when the Assyrian king Assurbanipal (669–627 BC) allied with Lydia against the Cimmerians, he protected his ambitions in the region by maintaining the royal road connecting Nineveh to Sardis. This road provided the Assyrian court with a direct conduit to channel its political, military, and cultural influences to western Anatolia, and by extension to the coastal

states of Ionia. It is into this context of exchange between royal courts that some scholars place the influence of Akkadian religious literature upon the Homeric epics (Rollinger 1996).

Other scholars credit peripatetic Near Eastern artisans (Gordon 1956), seers, and purification priests (Burkert 1992) with disseminating their sacred, “magical,” and medical traditions (Thomas 2004) (and cite Homeric references to itinerant seers and bards in support, e.g., *Odyssey* 17.383–5). Thus, it is during this period of increased access (ca. the eighth to seventh centuries BC) that the Mesopotamian protective deities gallu and lamaštu were introduced to the Greek-speaking world, becoming the demons Gallo and Lamia (West 1991). Images of Gilgamesh and Enkidu slaying Humbaba, the guardian of the Cedar Forest, similarly began to inspire depictions of Perseus killing the Gorgon. Apotropaic masks of Humbaba’s frightening face also appear in Aegean domestic settings at this time (Faraone 1992). The Aegean practice of extispicy, along with that of augury from birds, lecanomancy, and certain “magical” practices all appear to have been imported from the Near East during this period (Burkert 1992:41–52; Dalley and Reyes 1998a:100–1; Faraone 1993, 1995, 2002). The existence of migrant seers and bards may provide a background for understanding the etymological connection between the Greek word *temenos* “sacred precinct” and the Akkadian *temmēnu* “boundary marker, foundation deposit, temple platform” (West 1997:36). It also allows us to understand why many Greek musical instruments, as well as the so-called “Pythagorean” system of tuning, have Mesopotamian origins (Yamauchi 1967). Nevertheless, it is probable that such figures had enjoyed a great deal of influence already during the Bronze Age (Bachvarova forthcoming).

Still, cultural exchange between the cities of the Aegean and Mesopotamia was very close during the late archaic and classical periods. In some cases, the evidence for exchange appears to go well beyond the orbits of courtiers and migrant seers. One notable example is the worship of Hera at Samos, which had a particularly Mesopotamian look. Discovered there were Assyrian bronze votive figurines of a man at prayer with his hand on a dog. The use of dog images and sacred dog cemeteries at Samos closely resembles the cult of Gula the Babylonian goddess of healing whose image was a canine (Burkert 1992:17–19, 75–9). Also discovered at Samos was a bronze *mišbuššu* dragon, a creature associated with the Babylonian cult of Marduk. The annual cultic procession of Hera also involved ritual bathing and clothing of the divine statue similar to that practiced at Babylon during the New Year festival (Dalley and Reyes 1998a:98). Just how Hera’s cult on Samos acquired these Mesopotamian trappings is unknown. Some have suggested the influence of traveling Assyrian merchants or Greek mercenaries returning from Babylon (Burkert 1992:77), but the combined evidence suggests a more continued Mesopotamian stimulus.

Evidence for Near Eastern influence in the Aegean world after the seventh century BC becomes increasingly obvious and is rarely debated. International affairs, especially wars, close the gap between east and west. Aegean mercenaries can be found in Egyptian, Levantine, and Mesopotamian armies, but we do not know what their religions were. Shifting alliances in the sixth century BC, caused in part by the threat of Babylonian power, brought Cyprus and Cyrene to the aid of Egypt. The Mediterranean world was becoming smaller. Ionian merchants and craftsmen were living in

Babylon and apparently marrying among the local population (Coldstream 1993). It is around this time that the Presocratic philosophers (e.g., Pythagoras of Samos, Pherecydes of Syros, and Thales of Miletos) were becoming familiar with Babylonian science and mythology (Dalley and Reyes 1998a:104).

Later still when Persia emerged as a world power, we find Babylon allying with Sparta, and despite the eventual war that ensued between the Greek city-states and Persia, east-west contacts of all kinds only increased. For some time, these contacts were hostile. For example, when the Ionians burned the temple of Kubaba in Sardis, the Persian kings launched a series of counterattacks on Greek sanctuaries that lasted for nearly two decades (Mikalson 2004b:217). Nevertheless, we eventually find Greeks working in Persia, even in positions of high status. Greek artisans began to adopt artistic styles that they thought of as Persian, even though the styles were in origin Babylonian (Dalley and Reyes 1998b:108–9). It is during this period of intimate contact that the Greek world became aware of the religions of Persia, including Zoroastrianism (de Jong 1997). By the fifth century BC Near Eastern mythologies were topics of discussion among Athenian sophists (Dalley and Reyes 1998b:110–11).

By the late fourth century BC, in the hellenistic period, cultural influences and religious practices were moving fluidly in all directions (Scheid 2004). Alexander's conquest of Babylon resulted in direct national ties with Macedonia and the steady flow of knowledge of Babylonian customs and beliefs to the west. Alexander and his Seleucid successors allowed Mesopotamian cities to exist as they had for centuries, and even participated in their religious festivals, including the Babylonian New Year, where presumably they would have been exposed to Babylonian religious customs and textual traditions such as that of *Enūma Elish*.

Alexander's successors in Egypt, the Ptolemies, lavished support upon Egyptian temples (Finnestad 1997) and fully promoted the worship of Egyptian gods, especially Amun-Re. They even portrayed themselves on temple walls in pharaonic dress as Horus incarnate (Koenen 1993). Egyptian influences appear to have been greater on hellenistic religion than hellenism was on Egyptian religion. Zeus was identified with Amun and was depicted with the physical attributes of Amun-Re, including his ram's horns and solar disk. Ptolemaic efforts to introduce the figure of Sarapis, on the other hand, did not meet the interests of the Egyptians, who preferred their long-standing solar cults of Isis, Osiris, Horus, and Amun-Re (Fraser 1972:1.274; Morenz 1973:246).

The city of Alexandria became a hotbed of intercultural exchange, where Greek speakers lived side by side with Jews and Egyptians. Their religious traditions came into frequent contact and conflict (Fraser 1972:1.24–76, 189–301; Gruen 1998, 2000). Alexandrian tombs illustrate the symbiotic relationship between hellenistic and Egyptian religious traditions (Venit 2002). Alexandrian literary activity similarly incorporates Egyptian religious tastes (Noegel 2004; Stephens 2003). Egyptian religions also spread to the Aegean. In the hellenistic period the cults of Isis, Horus, and Osiris were rather widespread throughout the Mediterranean world (Johnston 2004a:104–5; Mikalson 2005: 202). A cult to Amun had already been established in Athens a century earlier.

Though the latter periods of Aegean history are better documented than the earlier periods, the aggregate impact of the evidence suggests that the vehicles of cultural

Scholars of the Near East have suggested that the translation of gods' names may be compared to the earlier Mesopotamian practice of listing divine names in one language (e.g., Sumerian) along with their equivalents in another language (e.g., Akkadian, Hurrian, Kassite, Hittite, Elamite) and brief descriptions of their function (Civil 1995:2312). Listings such as "An = *Anum*" and "An = *Anum ša amēli*" are typically discussed in this context. The lexical practice is sometimes described as having its origins in international law, specifically the need to invoke gods of equal rank in oaths (Assmann 2004:24–5). The custom is attested in sacred narratives as well. We find it in the biblical story of Abraham, who swears an oath to the Caananite king of Salem in the name of "Yahweh-El Most High," as opposed to the king's "El Most High" (Genesis 14:19–23).

Nevertheless, we cannot attribute this purpose to all divine synonym lists, because some of them offer linguistic equivalents for Sumerian divine names at a time when Sumerian was no longer spoken (e.g., "An = *Anum*" dates to 1300–1100 BC). Thus, it hardly could have represented contemporary ritual practice among the population. In addition, many of the gods of Mesopotamia had long borne multiple names. In some cases this makes it difficult to tell if the lists are simply providing a roster of a god's lesser-known names. Moreover the various lists had very different purposes and histories. "An = *Anum*," for example, serves to codify the known divine names in conjunction with contemporary knowledge and to map out their genealogical relationships to other gods, whereas the shorter list "Anu = *Anum ša amēli*" not only associates gods of similar function, it absorbs minor gods into major ones. It also associates a number of important gods of long standing (e.g., Enlil, Šin, and Nabû) with the newly promoted Babylonian god Marduk (as it does also with Ea), thus making them subordinate to him (Lambert 1975). The lists, therefore, serve not simply to equate or even to codify, but also to establish a quasi-henotheistic divine order that was promulgated by the royal house. The lists are documents of political as much as religious import. Nevertheless, their comparative value for understanding the hellenistic practice of *interpretatio* is limited.

Another way of explaining the hellenistic practice of *interpretatio* has been to compare it with the Egyptian custom of joining divine names such as Amun-Re or Re-Harakhty. Yet this also is not exactly a parallel practice because the names do not represent translations. Neither of the Egyptian deities comprising joint names was regarded as foreign, and despite appearances, no "hybridity" is implied. Each deity retained its individuality; the first name stood for a god with "cultic/local dimension," the second for the "cosmic" or "translocal" manifestation of that god (Assmann 2004:25). Therefore, while the Egyptian practice may shed light on the phenomenon of dual divine names such as Yahweh-Elohim in Genesis 2–3 or Kothar-wa-Hasis at Ugarit (cf. Xella 1990), it does little to help us understand the process of *interpretatio*.

Moreover, a good deal of evidence suggests that peoples of the Near East understood their own gods to be distinct from those in other lands. The Hittites in particular resisted efforts to equate their own gods with those of others, even though they deliberately imported gods into their pantheon from elsewhere. As a result the members of their pantheon grew in number until the Hittites themselves referred to their pantheon as containing "thousands of gods." Their god-lists name numerous divinities, but keep their places of origin distinct. The few instances in

transmission were as complex in the Bronze Age as they were at the end of the first millennium BC. It is clear that multiple opportunities for the exchange of religious ideas existed at all times, even if our understanding of them is better for some periods than others. Nevertheless, while we may obtain some insight into the contexts and mechanisms of exchange, our inability to provide anything but the broad historical contours of the processes of religious exchange remains a central problem for scholars.

Shared Taxonomies and the Problem of Cultural Exchange

Historians of religion have long been occupied with the study of what occurs when religions come into contact. But only in recent decades have classicists and scholars of the ancient Near East begun to engage in dialogue with them and their works. This dialogue has allowed the respective disciplines to recognize that few beliefs and practices are adopted or assimilated without adaptation and that no religious tradition is resistant to change or exists in a vacuum. Of course, when religions come into contact some elements are seen as too foreign. Ritual, for example, tends to be conservative by nature; the smallest changes, whether instituted from within or imposed from the outside, often provoke anxieties and fear of identity loss in practitioners. On the other hand, religious practices that appear too similar also cause problems of identity (Smith 2004:230–302). Thus it is extremely important to account for cultural borrowings, especially in matters of religious belief and practice, by postulating the existence of shared taxonomies (ways of classifying the world) and the preconditions that make adoption possible (Raaflaub 2000:60–4). Defining and explaining these taxonomies and preconditions is a complicated endeavor that poses a number of difficulties. Illustrating these difficulties particularly well is the hellenistic practice of equating Greek and Near Eastern gods.

During the hellenistic period, Hellenes began to equate the gods of foreign lands with their own native deities in a process often referred to by scholars as *interpretatio* or “translation.” A Hellene could, without any apparent theological dilemma, worship any foreign god that most closely resembled his own native deity. Thus, Apollo was identified with Baal, Zeus with Amun, Aphrodite with Ishtar, Artemis with Anat, Demeter with Isis, and so on. In the past these equations were seen as evidence of the impact of hellenism in foreign lands. However, recent scholars have pointed out that such equations are found only in Greek sources, not Near Eastern ones, making them unlikely representations of hellenization (Oelsner 2002:189–90). Of course, this does not mean that they do not represent an effort to spread hellenic culture, only that they do not represent the successful result of such an effort.

Others have seen these translations as evidence for “syncretism” or “hybridity,” that is, the fusion of Aegean and Near Eastern religions. However, neither “syncretism” nor “hybridity” offers a particularly useful model for understanding the process of *interpretatio*, and not just because of their tainted colonial histories (Graf 2004a:10). Neither model helps us to ascertain the processes that underlie such equations, and so neither is able to provide anything but a characterization of the phenomenon.

which the lists make apparent equations between one god and another have been shown to represent state efforts to bolster Hurrian elements in the Hittite pantheon (Collins 2004).

The peoples of the Near East not only regarded their own gods as distinct but also those of their neighbors. Thus when the Hittite king Murshili II (ca. 1350 BC) suffered a medical attack that resulted in an inability to speak, his priests suggested that he summon the gods of Lesbos and Mycenae to heal him (Morris 2001:428). Compare 2 Kings 1, where Ahaziah seeks help from Baal, and 2 Kings 5, where Naaman seeks help from Yahweh. In addition, an accompanying oracle asserts that these gods were to be worshiped in accordance with their native customs (Bachvarova forthcoming). Certainly, had such equations been possible, Murshili II could have requested the help of a deity with similar skills from his own pantheon.

Greek speakers similarly respected the power of foreign deities in their native lands. They also appear to have maintained the individuality of their own gods on foreign soil even though several of their own gods (e.g., Adonis, Aphrodite, Apollo, Meter) appear to have foreign origins (Burkert 1985:176–9). Discoveries dating to the hellenistic period give additional evidence for the individuality of foreign deities even in the Greek-speaking world. An altar found on the island of Kos, inscribed in both Greek and Aramaic, is dedicated to Bel, the god of Palmyra. Similarly, a bilingual Greek and Phoenician inscription found at the Piraeus in Athens is dedicated to Nergal. Greek “magical” papyri dating to the Roman period also invoke numerous Egyptian, Levantine, and Mesopotamian gods individually by name, regardless of whether they accord them similar status. Therefore, despite the existence of god-lists and hyphenated divine names, evidence suggests that Aegean and Near Eastern gods continued to maintain their individuality.

Even if we accept the proposed parallels as explanations for the hellenistic practice, the issue of shared taxonomy remains. We do not know what criteria Hellenes considered when linking their native gods to non-native names. Was it their perceived functions, attributes, cosmological associations, or their relative ranks in their respective pantheons? Would such equations have functioned also in Aegean lands? And if so, why were Hellenes drawn to the worship of foreign gods (e.g., Isis, Horus, Osiris) on their own soil? Was it because they were not tied to the economic and nationalistic interests of the Aegean city-states in which they took root? And how did such “translations” account for local variations within pantheons? Exactly whose pantheon was being equated? Near East divine hierarchies often significantly differed from locale to locale and from one era to another. Even when gods of the same name were worshiped in different places (e.g., Baal/Bel or Ishtar/Astarte) their cults and relationships to their pantheons could be very different. Thus at Sidon, the goddess Astarte was paired with Eshmun, at Tyre she was Melqart’s wife, but at Carthage Baal-Hamon was coupled with Tinit. Such local variations underscore the difficulties that must have been present already in antiquity with making clear equations between Aegean and Near Eastern deities.

The practice of *interpretatio* offers just one demonstration of the difficulties scholars face when trying to ascertain the preconditions that make the transmission of religious ideas possible. These difficulties are only compounded when we consider that every element that entered Aegean religion from the Near East must have been facilitated by its own set of social, economic, political, and historical preconditions.

Monotheisms, Monolatries, Henotheisms, and Polytheisms

If one reads early works on ancient Near Eastern religion one often finds rather “black and white” descriptions of ancient belief systems. Typically, one finds monotheism, the belief in and worship of one god, starkly contrasted with polytheism, the belief in and worship of many gods. Representing monotheism, of course, was ancient Israel. Representing polytheism was essentially every other culture of antiquity. In addition, polytheism and monotheism often were portrayed as existing in an evolutionary relationship to one another, with monotheism (hence also Judaism and eventually Christianity) representing the rather unique end of the line and, consequently, the more morally and ethically advanced of the two systems.

Recent decades, however, have seen major changes in the way scholars think about ancient Near Eastern religions. Ancient Israel, for one, is now seen as a largely polytheistic society (Zevit 2001), whose early religious history was marked by monolatry, the worship of one god, but belief in the existence of many (Rendsburg 1995). Only during and after the Babylonian exile (586 BC) did a small circle of Judahite elites maintain absolute monotheism, perhaps under the influence of Zoroastrianism. Moreover, as we now know, pre-exilic Israelite religions also were influenced by Syro-Canaanite and Assyrian traditions (Mullen 1980; M. Smith 1990, 2001, 2003; Stern 2003). Early efforts to account for Israelite monotheism by attributing it to the influence of the Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaten (Freud 1939) have, for the most part, been abandoned.

Our understanding of Egyptian and Mesopotamian polytheism also has become more sophisticated (Hornung 1971; Lambert 1975). Far from defining these belief systems merely as the worship of many gods, scholars are now referring to them as types of “complex polytheism” or henotheism, in which many (even all) gods can be contained in, conceived as, or represented by a single god. Often this god is believed to be the creator of the others and stands at the top of a well-developed hierarchy. But this is not always the case. In Egypt, for example, the word “god” in the abstract (*ntr*) could refer to any god that one was addressing at a particular time, and that god, regardless of his or her rank in the pantheon, could simultaneously stand in for others invoked by the supplicant. In essence, a god could be one thing and also another. Gods also could be represented in multiple ways (e.g., anthropomorphically, zoomorphically, or symbolically) without theological compromise. Thus Thoth, the patron god of the scribes and “magic,” could be represented as a human figure with the head of an ibis or as a divine baboon even if it was believed that he had mortal origins (Hodge 2004). In addition, throughout the Near East ancients made no distinction between a god and the physical properties or phenomena that a god embodied (e.g., sun, moon, wind).

These aspects of Near Eastern polytheism/henotheism complicate the way we think about the westward diffusion of Near Eastern cults precisely because they raise questions of taxonomy. Again, the topic of *interpretatio* illustrates this well. What does it mean, for example, for Hellenes in Egypt to equate Zeus with Amun, and not with Re, when Amun in his native system can represent the cultic and local

manifestation of Re and/or all other Egyptian gods? Did Hellenes know this or did they posit their equations based solely on a superficial understanding of the Amun cult? And if the understanding is superficial, then the process of *interpretatio* can hardly represent the actual cultic practices of Hellenes on foreign soil. If they were aware of the subtleties of indigenous forms of worship, then what does this tell us about the nature of their own belief system(s)? In what ways were the differences between hellenistic polytheism and Egyptian henotheism mediated? Some have attempted to contextualize the process of *interpretatio* by suggesting that the hellenistic period was a time in which individual gods and goddesses were being increasingly relegated to relativistic notions of the universality of divinity. The late antique development of a belief in a universal Highest Being (Greek *hypsistos*) who embodies all other gods (native and foreign) is sometimes seen as having stemmed from the practice of *interpretatio*, and to be sure the name by which one calls a god appears to have been irrelevant to some Greeks and Romans (Assmann 2004:27). Some have understood the belief in a Highest Being as a move towards monotheism (Mikalson 2005:202). Others have suggested that it tallies with attempts to create greater political unity (Fowden 1993). Nevertheless, the developmental relationship between *hypsistos* and *interpretatio* is by no means certain, and it remains to be articulated how a belief in a *hypsistos* differs from the various henotheistic systems of the ancient Near East.

If the process of *interpretatio* (or perhaps the contemporary study of it) obscures anything, it is the fact that not all polytheistic/henotheistic systems are the same. In some cases the differences may be as profound as those that distinguish one contemporary form of monotheism from another. Even a religious system like Zoroastrianism, which is often labeled “dualist,” defies our ability to apply this label consistently. Its sacred texts (the Avestas) may be read as supporting monotheism, dualism, and even polytheism (Stausberg 2004:204).

Moreover, each of the gods in any polytheistic or henotheistic system exists not in a vacuum, but in an ongoing dialectical relationship to the larger pantheon. The gods' relationships to one another in part define them. In the Near East these relationships are primarily kinship-based (i.e., gods are fathers, mothers, husbands, wives, sons, daughters), but they are not all identical in every locale. The goddesses of Anatolia, for example, appear to have enjoyed equal status with gods. Thus the Hittites often addressed their prayers to the daughters of gods who were expected to intercede on their behalf (Hoffner 1995:566–77). In addition, divine kinship relations are contextualized by social structures that mirror the political systems in which the religions exist, whether monarchies (Israel, Mesopotamia, Anatolia) or democracies (Athens). Nevertheless, some social structures, such as the divine assembly, appear in different political systems (Ugarit, Mesopotamia, Athens). Until scholars factor into their comparisons the subtle differences that exist between ancient polytheisms/henotheisms, our ability to ascertain what preconditions enabled any hellenistic “translation” will remain limited.

“Greek religion and the ancient Near East” is a complex subject. While classicists and scholars of the Near East have already shed an incredible amount of light on the subject, future researchers are still left with many puzzles to solve. Our inability to define the relationship between myths and rituals makes it difficult to determine its relative value for the comparative study of Near Eastern and Aegean religions. The

difficulties in establishing the exact vehicles for the exchange of religious ideas, especially as one moves into the more remote past, provide little more than plausible models for transmission. Further, the ever-growing list of parallels between Aegean and Near Eastern texts and religious practices only underscores the need to establish what shared taxonomies and conditions made their transmission possible. Moreover, the complex and often subtle differences that distinguish one polytheistic or henotheist religion from another make such an investigation far more difficult. The four problems surveyed above only scratch the surface when it comes to the difficulties that confront scholars engaged in the comparative study of ancient Mediterranean religions. Nevertheless, it is in grappling with such challenges that scholarship moves forward. Indeed, as archaeologists continue to unearth new finds and as textual research on the topic continues, we shall be in a better position to tackle such challenges, especially if we do so with interdisciplinary dialogue and goals.

GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

For general discussions of this subject, see Adkins and Adkins 1996, Black and Green 1992, Hallo and Younger 1997–2002, Keel and Uehlinger 1998, Toorn, Horst, and Becking 1999. For Anatolia see D.P. Wright 2004a; for Egypt, Assmann 2004, Hornung 1971, Kákosy 1995, Velde 2003; for Israel, Collins 2004, Niditch 1997; for Syro-Canaan, Caquot 1980, Toorn 1995, D.P. Wright 2004b; for Mesopotamia, Beaulieu 2004, Bottéro 1992, 2001, Lambert 1968, 1975, Livingstone 1997, Wiggermann 1995.