Ethics and Piety in the Ancient Near East

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¡Ay! ¿quièn podrà sanarme?
Acaba de entregarte ya de vero.
No quieras enviarme
de hoy más mensajero:
que no saben decime lo que quiero.
John of the Cross, *Cántico Espiritual* 6

PRESUPPOSITIONS

Irreversibly, the unfolding of human history has led to an ever-growing expansion of our collective consciousness. The accretion of experience has never reached a ceiling beyond which further expansion either would be impossible or could occur only at the expense of other experience previously acquired. Like a diamond able to grow outwardly in size and inwardly in clarity, cumulated human experience leads to an ever-greater depth of perception. Here lies the worth of culture, which serves as the mechanism for the transmission of personal experience at the social level, and here lies the beauty of history, which helps tell how it all happened.

I choose to assume irreversibility in order to stress, ironically, what may appear at first to be a glaring example of cultural reversion or, at least, the abandonment of earlier stages of experience. At first blush, in fact, it would appear that polytheism was jettisoned as a naive perception of the divine when it came to be replaced by monotheism. And most would ask whether we can attribute a genuine and rich religious experience to a theological system so riddled with internal antinomies at best or sheer fantasies at worst.

In any case, whether or not we heed the strong condemnation of polytheism that the monotheistic tradition of ancient Israel articulated so poignantly in the Bible, what can we see of value and relevance in the ancient near eastern polytheistic experience? I propose to show some reasons for seriously viewing ourselves as the heirs of ancient polytheism, for accepting such tradition as a valid and genuine religious experience, and for analyzing the ancient Israelite ethics and piety from the point of view of its cultural matrix (the "pagan" Near East) rather than the other way around.

I will clarify my understanding of some basic concepts. First, a "collective consciousness" may at first appear to be a contradiction in terms, since consciousness is an exclusive prerogative of the individual. What I mean to say is that individual consciousness is affected by culture. Not that culture is in itself either consciousness or experience. Rather, culture provides the social context through which one person can touch another without the two even being known to each other, across boundaries of space and time. Thus, through culture the personal experience of one can be kindled in another, expressive registers can be appropriated and transformed,

and thereby individual consciousness can be expanded.

"Religion" I take to be the culturally articulated interaction between humans and their own perception of the absolute. While religion as such has a broader scope than the one pertinent to our current theme, it is of fundamental importance for a proper understanding of ethics and piety. Religious interaction occurs between two poles: (1) the characteristics attributed to the absolute and the modalities through which the absolute is perceived to communicate with humans constitute a definition of the divine world (theology, mythology, etc.); (2) the religious response that human culture articulates for itself socially and expects of its members individually defines the nature of religious practice (cult, prayer, etc.). The divine pole in this interaction is by definition intangible and thus remains beyond the reach of historians; in this capacity, we have no means to determine whether the divine world is an ontological reality or a mere fantastic projection. But it is sufficient, as it is indispensable, for historians to identify the perceptual range within which such an absolute was apprehended and through which its characteristics were communicated culturally. Such a perception of the absolute, which affected both ethics and piety at their core, will be discussed below.

"Ethics" is the identification of absolute values that condition human behavior; it is also human behavior itself to the extent that behavior is affected by such values. Regardless of whether these values are real or merely perceived as such, they impact dramatically on human life. It is this affecting presence that we will especially consider later. To the extent that these values are perceived as absolute, ethics is religious in nature, in the sense of religion as defined above. There are, however, fundamental differences in the way ethics is related to the perception of the divine, and this strongly affects the definition of ethical systems—for which the Near East offers a very clear case in point.

The personal, individual response elicited in humans by their perception of the divine is what we may call "piety." The outward organization of cult has a bearing on piety, in that individuals may find a genuine echo of their personal religious feelings in the structure of rituals planned for social needs. But it is especially in the expression of personal religion that piety becomes evident, in those moments when human confrontation with the divine is most deeply felt. This psychological dimension of piety, a power of surrender to a spiritual dimension, will be brought into focus.

THE SHAPE OF PERCEPTION

From the very beginning of historical documentation in the Near East, the recognition of religious values was certainly more than a vague apprehension of received customs or habits; similarly, the expression of piety was more than the inarticulate surge of basic feelings toward some unknown power. Both ethics and piety assumed, at an early stage, a well-defined cultural embodiment that channeled and coalesced human perceptions into a shared body of forms. Just as important as the human needs for attention and response was the other term of the equation, the absolute or divine presence that was perceived to lend attention and to furnish the response, for such a perception had a very distinct shape—or, rather, distinct shapes, depending on time and space.

We will focus on the two most distinctive, if disproportionate, types: the "polytheistic" and the ancient Israelite perception. The disproportion arises most visibly in terms of their respective constituencies: a presumed minority in ancient Israel, whose views are reflected in the Hebrew Bible, versus the masses, urban and rural, cultivated and not, in the rest of the ancient Near East. For reasons of our own cultural tradition, our view of the polytheistic Near East is colored by the posture assumed by the Israelite tradition. (I will use the term "Israelite" to refer to that portion of ancient Israel whose views are reflected in the biblical tradition. How widespread and popular this view may have been within Israelite society need not concern us here, but it should be remembered that much of the "polytheistic" perception was widely shared within Israel itself. Under "polytheistic Near East," on the other hand, I subsume the traditions of southwestern Asia and of Egypt.)

A first important observation is that while we have no record of the polytheistic tradition ever

assessing the merits of the ancient Israelite tradition, we are all familiar with the aggressive and articulate rejection of the former by the latter. This is obviously conditioned by the relative significance of the overall cultural milieu, Israel being a small provincial entity and therefore unable to command much attention in the world of the great powers and the great cultures. In point of fact, the polytheistic traditions do not exhibit much sensitivity for their individual distinctiveness. Marginal exceptions are found in very special settings, such as a letter written by the monarch of a powerful border kingdom, Aziru of Amurru, to Akhenaten, in which he refers to the main Egyptian god simply by the letter A, leaving open the question as to whether he means Amun or Aten (Aton). (See "Hymn to Aten: Akhenaten Worships the Sole God" later in this volume.)

But there is another dimension to this disproportion of perceptual ranges, one that is more surprising. Ancient Israel does not view its tradition as being chronologically parallel to that of polytheistic religions but, rather, as one that came into being relatively late, long after the establishment of the other tradition, and as a result of a concrete phenomenon of "conversion." Instead of a mythical cosmic time that precedes, and out of which flow, all other cultural and religious traditions, ancient Israel recognized its beginnings in the conversion of Abraham, who was perceived as a Mesopotamian polytheist breaking away from a preexisting tradition—a view stressed in a special way in certain aspects of the tradition (e.g., Joshua 24:2). The lack of a remote ancestry shared with all other cultures would seem to diminish the luster with which the Israelites might have wanted to endow their understanding of their own past—all the more so, in fact, given the rather demeaning nature of the peasant traits of this early tradition. And yet it is precisely in this almost embarassing setting that Israel saw the origin of the cultural channeling of its own spiritual experience: in harking back to the "god of Abraham," Israel rejected a cosmic time as the point of origin for the god it worshiped. The "event" of the conversion of Abraham as perceived in the Israelite tradition bears much relevance for our immediate interest here.

Let us pursue this line of thought with regard

to the polytheistic perception. The Mesopotamians, Phoenicians, or Egyptians did not perceive their religions as having had any particular beginning. The various theogonies refer to the origin of the various gods rather than to the human recognition of their divine world, and, just as important, they are only apparently accounts of a beginning; more properly, they are the description of a process of transformation, whereby an amorphous whole becomes progressively more finely differentiated. What religion describes is ultimately a form of entropy. In this sense, polytheistic religion appears as more rational than its Israelite counterpart. The absolute divine reality is upstream of the individual gods: it is the universal fate that defines the nature of things and the laws of their inner workings. In this perspective, we are not dealing with a "polytheistic" conception but with a unified system based on the applicability of predictable laws. We will see the effect that this has on ethics.

At this juncture I wish to stress the element of predictability as a factor in the characterization of the divine. In the biblical account, the event of Abraham's call is wholly un-Mesopotamian (although it happens to Abraham when he is still, technically, a Mesopotamian) because of the change it proposes: rather than rationally appropriating a portion of a predictable universe (as a Mesopotamian might do through divination), a human being is asked to bare his consciousness and accept one unpredictability after the next. The later patriarchal tradition of Joseph stresses the same trait in what is an even more technical juxtaposition: dreams are to be interpreted not according to established patterns but according to an intuition essentially based on the apprehension of the unpredictable (i.e., of what is not rationally channeled).

Fate is predictable not in the superficial sense that it can be predicted but because by its very operation it regulates in an invariable way both the horizontal and the vertical dimensions of reality—that is, the nature of things and their destiny. It is predictable, therefore, by virtue of the laws it implements, onto which both gods and humans can partially open windows, especially through the exercise of divination. This can be understood not as an irrelevant and super-

stitious practice of magic but as the honest effort to identify the inner, rational harmony of the universal order, of which fate is the pervasive glue and the gods but the keepers.

This leads to one further point of comparison and contrast, having to do with the issue of communicability. There is, in Mesopotamian polytheism, no particular expectation that fate will be endowed with the power of self-expression: it is an inert force which does not properly "will" anything, and to which one does not address any form of human self-expression (prayer). Fate communicates through its very predictability, through the fact that its recurrent patterns, its laws, are recognized. (In Egyptian polytheism, fate is more specifically personified as Shaï; Maʿat, as a personified principle of order and a specific cosmogonic principle, may appear as a less impersonal equivalent of fate. But as an overall structure system, to the extent that one envisages the pantheon as a whole in its relationship to the world of values, the Egyptian and the Mesopotamian situations are much closer to each other than either one is to that of Israel.)

The god of Israel can communicate only by articulating what his current choices are, since there is no rationally predictable pattern that can be ascribed to him. This god is perceived as addressing the individual (and through him the community) in order to articulate what his volition may be from one time to the next. First of all, he "wills" in a very specific and targeted manner, which may have surprisingly little bearing on established (cultural) patterns; second, he communicates the details of his choice; third, he expects humans to accept his choice, not to conquer it, as it were, through a human process of rational discovery. In this sense, the biblical term "Living God" acquires a special significance: it refers to the free and active dimension perceived as proper to God, in contrast with the underlying and inert dimension of fate.

THE AFFECTING PRESENCE

It is to this opposition of acceptance versus discovery that we now turn our attention. Religious culture is, in Israel, acceptance of communicated unpredictability; in polytheism, it is discovery of a predictability that carries its own self-declaration in its patterning and in the rational scrutiny it invites. To the extent that these values touch on human behavior, religious culture blends with ethics: the values that are shared within a community and condition the reality of daily human existence carry all the weight of a profoundly affecting presence, whatever our assessment of its ontological status may be. On the face of it, there are overriding similarities between the content of the value systems of the polytheistic and the Israelite worlds, to such an extent that we may be tempted to ascribe the differences to a mere question of literary taste and compositional frame. Out of several texts that could be adduced, I will choose two parallel sets, from Mesopotamia and from the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. The first is a comparison between a Mesopotamian collection of incantations aimed at purifying a sinner of his or her faults and the biblical text which contains the Decalogue. (The Mesopotamian text is known by the Akkadian term Šurpu, which means "burning." The arrangement given below follows the sequence of the Mesopotamian text, except for passages marked by ">," which anticipate passages given later in the text. The numbers in square brackets refer to the sequence of the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20:8; parentheses around square brackets refer to similarities that are only partial.)

Šurpu, Tablet 2	Exodus, Chapter 20
Incantation. Be it released, great gods, lords of absolution, NN, son of NN, whose god is NN, whose goddess is NN,	Moses then went up to God, and Yahweh called to him from the mountain . . .
who has eaten what is taboo to his god	([4]) Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy . . .
who said "no" for "yes," who said "yes" for "no"; who pointed his finger accusingly behind	[9] You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

the back of his fellow man; who calumniated, spoke what is not allowed to speak; who as a witness caused wicked things to be spoken; who caused the judge to pronounce incorrect judgment

who scorned his god, despised his goddess
> he does not know what is a crime against god. . . . his sins are against his god . . .

[1,2] You shall have no gods except me. You shall not make yourself a carved image. . . . You shall not bow down to them or serve them. For I, Yahweh your god, am a jealous god . . .

who has oppressed the weak woman; who turned a woman away from her city; who estranged son from father, who estranged father from son, . . .
> he is full of contempt against his father . . .
he despised his parents, offended the elder sister . . .
who did not free a captive, did not—let the prisoner see the light of day, . . .

[5] Honor your father and your mother . . .

he gave with small measure, and received with big measure . . . he used an untrue balance . . . he took silver that was not his . . . he set up an untrue boundary . . .

[8] You shall not steal.

he entered his neighbor's house

[10] You shall not covet your neighbor's house.

he approached his neighbor's wife

[10] You shall not covet your neighbor's wife.

he shed his neighbor's blood

[6] You shall not kill.

he ousted a handsome young man from his family, he scattered a gathered clan
> he slept in the bed of an accursed person, . . . he drank from the cup of an accursed person

([7]) You shall not commit adultery.

he omitted the name of his god in his incense offering, he made the purifications, then complained and withheld it; . . . he has sworn after he did something . . .

([3]) You shall not utter the name of Yahweh your god to misuse it . . .

The second comparison is between two texts that range even farther afield. One is a Mesopotamian text known as the Moral Canon, which deals with a description of psychological attitudes, and the other is a major Christian manifesto, the Beatitudes.

Moral Canon (by page and line)

96:11 If he says "I am poor," he will become rich.
86:6 If he says "May I become poor," . . .
96:10 If he says "I am weak," he will become strong.

Matthew 5; Luke 6

5:3 Blessed are the poor in spirit, because theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
6:20 Blessed the poor, because yours is the kingdom of God.

Continued from the previous page.

96:9 If he says "I am powerful," he will become small.

96:8 If he says "I am a hero," he will be shamed.

98:21 If he is impetuous, he will not obtain what he wishes.

104:15 If in his heart he wants mortification, he will prosper.

94:46 If he is surrounded by wealth, he will let go of everything, he will die soon.

6:24 Woe to you rich, because you have received your consolation.

98:22 If their heart is troubled, it will rejoice, it will light up.

98:23 If he is sick in his heart, he will be answered in his inmost desires.

98:25 If his heart is in the dark, he will rejoice.

5:4 Blessed are those who mourn, because they will be consoled.

86:18 If in his heart he weeps constantly, . . .

104:12 If he asks himself "Why should I keep it up?" he will rejoice.

102:37 If he is in joy, a depression will seize him.

6:21 Blessed you who are weeping now, because you will be comforted.

6:25 Woe to you who are laughing now, because you will suffer and weep.

92:34 If he says all the time "When shall I see? When shall I see?" his days will become longer.

102:26 If there is too little for him, he will prolong his life, he will have sufficient food.

102:27 If everything goes well for him, either death or poverty will come.

98.35 If his health is good, a serious disease will overtake him.

5:6 Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice, because they will be sated.

6:21 Blessed are those who hunger now, because they will be sated.

6:25 Woe to you who are full now, because you will hunger.

102:32 If he is just, and nevertheless things go wrong, later on things will go better.

102:25 If he speaks according to justice, he will have a good recompense.

102:34 If he is just, he will see light.

86:12 If he is flattered, he will not obtain . . .

100:14 If he is always praised, he will remain well.

5:10 Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of justice, because theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

98:32 If he loves what is good, only goodness will follow him all the time.

98:26 If he has a great heart, he will reach old age.

107:31 If he is endowed with fear (of god?), he will be victorious.

6:26 Woe when everybody will say good things about you, because in the same manner they have dealt with the pseudo-prophets.

5:5 Blessed are the meek, because they will be comforted.

98:36 If he is merciful, he will die in abundance.

94:45 If he does favors, people will do favors to him.

5:7 Blessed are the merciful, because they will find mercy.

98:24 If he is limpid in his heart, he will find honor.

100:7 If he is pure . . .

92:38 If "yes" and "no" follow in good order in his mouth, hunger will go from his granary.

5:8 Blessed are the pure of heart, because they will see God.

83:1 If he is tranquil in his heart . . .
94:51 If he is concerned about helping others, the gods will follow him all the time.

5:9 Blessed are the peacemakers, because they will be called sons of God.

The synoptic arrangement of these texts will suffice to bring out the similarities of content, on which I cannot dwell here. The stylistic differences may be mentioned briefly. The Mesopotamian texts are phrased in the manner of scientific texts, which posit a hypothesis and the pertinent inference. They are not within a narrative frame; in other words, they do not issue from any specific event, nor are they attributed to any particular person. The Decalogue and the Beatitudes, in contrast, are declarations pronounced with an authority that is recognized as divine, and they are attached to very specific events and individuals. Not that there are no narrative frames in which the identification of values is linked to narrative events in the polytheistic systems. Within the Mesopotamian sphere, for instance, there are several myths about the handling (and often the theft) of the "tablets of destiny," which contain a repertoire of values. But these accounts are perceived as mythical in the sense that they are not attributed to human beings, much less to persons who are understood to have lived within very specific parameters of time and space, as Moses and Jesus did. Even more important, the events narrated in the myths are not presented as the fountainhead of a well-defined, coherent, and continuous tradition that, in the consciousness of its followers, has validity because it harks back to such an event. In Mesopotamia, as in the Egyptian polytheistic tradition, the myth is the imaginative, articulate, and well-reasoned exegetical counterpart of the more generalized perception contained in the scientific texts such as the Moral Canon quoted above.

This leads to a more far-reaching set of considerations having to do with the connection between ethical values and the divine sphere. In the polytheistic system, values are coterminous with the perception of the absolute; and conversely, their violation is a sin not in the sense of a personal offense against fate or any god in particular but, rather, in the sense of a breach that affects the harmony of a global order embodied by fate as the underlying nature of things. Sin is the disruption of a natural sequence, just as virtue is the harmonic adherence to such a

perceived (pervasive) synergy of values and forces. The values are not "willed" into being by an absolute power, such as fate or the gods; hence, sin is not disobedience of a willed mandate. It is, in a sense, an even more direct attack on the world of values because it lessens its congruence, it takes something away from it. The reparation that is made through the various incantations is meant to dissolve almost physically the stain of evil and to regenerate the harmony to its original steady state.

In Israel, values also are coterminous with the divine world, but only because they are posited by the explicit will of God, to such an extent that the will of God becomes the supreme value that can be perceived by humans, all the more so whenever it defies the canons of reasonable expectations. The most emblematic example is the prohibition to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil—negating, as it does, that very control of good and evil which is such a value in the polytheistic cultures. The most dramatic example is the command that Abraham sacrifice his son—which negates the fundamental value of life and love. (Admittedly, this dimension is especially apparent in the narrative/legal materials. The Israelite wisdom tradition is, on the face of it, closer to its near eastern counterparts, though on further inspection the overriding impact of divine will emerges here as well, but in ways that I cannot develop here.) In this light, the Israelite experience affirms a dimension of religious culture that is almost totally absent in the polytheistic experience and that places quite a different light on ethics—the concept of faith. The greatest commandment (Deuteronomy 6:4–5) is to love God in the specific sense that a human being is expected to accept the will of God above and beyond even fundamental human values, which in and of themselves end up being considered as no more than cultural trappings.

The Israelite attitude becomes more and more radicalized over time and grows into a form of paroxysm with the prophets, who often see the cultural establishment as an obstacle to the personal and collective acceptance of the unadulter-

ated will of God. What keeps the system from going altogether topsy-turvy is another Israelite concept: the fundamental correlate of the notion of faith, the concept of the covenant. God's will is totally unpredictable but not capricious; there is a fundamental, if hidden, coherence to what may otherwise appear as the madness of his will, and this coherence is expressed by his ever-renewed covenants. The solidity of the world of values, which for the polytheistic experience lay in its apprehension, lies for Israel in the belief that the bond with a specifically God-chosen human community is willed on an institutional basis. God's will wills to bind itself and defines its own bonds: there is coherence to the world of values because God wills it and expresses it in his own terms. Thus, the internal unity of the Israelite perception is held together through a delicate tension between human faith and divine covenant, whereas the internal unity of the polytheistic system derives from its overarching control of the values themselves.

An important correlative of the notions of faith and covenant is the notion of prophecy and miracle. On the one hand, the Israelite God wills the values and communicates them through articulate discourse, which becomes an incarnate manifestation of his "word." On the other hand, he can affect the normal operation of reality and alter it, whether on his own initiative in the pursuit of his own designs (as with the miracles of Exodus) or in response to specific human requests (as with the miracles of Elijah and Elisha). The structurally correlative polytheistic notions are altogether different: in Mesopotamia they appear as omens and incantations. (These particular correlatives are missing in Egypt, possibly on account of the Egyptian cyclical view of history. Alternative structural correlatives may be found in certain aspects of the cult of the dead, but I cannot pursue this argument here.) Omens lay bare the intrinsic meaning of abnormal variations within the natural order (which are not willed individually but have a recurrent, universal value), and incantations offer a mechanism for recalibrating one's existence with these variations. The ethical impact of these contrasting beliefs is apparent and is in line with the distinction between acceptance and discovery stressed above. Omens and incantations are the result of a Prometheus-like conquest of a hidden,

but knowable and rational, web of interrelationships; hence, to the Israelite perception, they appear like a sacrilegious attempt to scale heaven, as in the emblematic episode of the Tower of Babel. Conversely, prophetic messages and miracles can be accepted only as individual occurrences, not discovered as patterned recurrences; hence, they cannot properly be part of the polytheistic ethos. (See "Prophecy and Apocalyptics in the Ancient Near East" later in this volume.)

THE POWER OF SURRENDER

Lest the preceding emphasis on the rational aspects of the polytheistic system lead one to conclude that I am projecting onto ancient polytheism a form of rationalism similar to that of the European Enlightenment, we should turn to another side of the polytheists' perception of absolute values, that more subjective posture which emerges from a personal confrontation with these values. As was stressed above, predictability does not mean total vision; it refers only to a belief that the sum total of reality is intrinsically knowable if sufficient means can be found to control its broad range of manifestations. Human effort leads to an ever-greater appropriation of such means: the projection onto a mythical time of the creation of the city is a beautiful emblematic statement to this effect, urban culture being the supreme mechanism for effecting such appropriation. This effort is far from having been completed within the human sphere of action, but it is perceived as having been successfully achieved on another plane, that of the gods.

The gods provide the guarantee that the knowability of reality is not only potential but intrinsically factual and actual. They control predictability not because they are in themselves the wellspring of what is to be predicted but because they have surveyed it all and know the intrinsic congruence of reality. And they can help or hinder the human quest in the same direction. Which is why a polytheistic rationalism remains profoundly theistic. There is a burning sense of need, of expectation for something that the gods alone can provide, a profound attitude of sincere religiosity in the polytheistic

quest for harmony, a harmony with those absolute values which are known to be there but always beyond our reach. While ethics is the perception of an affecting presence that molds behavior, piety is the ever newly discovered power to surrender to this presence: the human ability to capture the world of values is related not only, and perhaps not so much, to the human power of perception but also to the human readiness to solicit and welcome the assistance of those who already fully enjoy this very perception.

There can be no question that there was genuine religious experience in the ancient Near East outside of Israel. The dichotomy between an idolatric, superstitious pagan culture and an authentically religious Israel is an image fed by the polemical statements found within Israel itself, but is at variance both with the evidence as we know it for the ancient Near East and, very possibly, with the original intent of those polemical statements. The dichotomy between superstition and authentic religiosity exists as much in the polytheistic cultures as it exists in Israel. It is true that the concept of idolatry as such is not part of the polytheistic conceptual world, where the notion of idol is missing. What, then, can be the yardstick in distinguishing between these two dimensions? There is, first, an extrinsic criterion that is explicit in the textual documentation itself. Incantations that are used to hurt fellow human beings are considered unacceptable "magic," which is punishable from the viewpoint of the legal system (*Code of Hammurabi*, Laws 1–5).

But how can the rest of what we label "magic" be subsumed under the rubric of authentic piety rather than of superstition? We must first shed the misconception that such practices as divination and incantations in Mesopotamia or funerary rites in Egypt were attempts to achieve a mechanical control over the supernatural. There was in fact a profound reverence and sense of expectation in the use of whatever cultural mechanisms were on hand to establish a contact with the supernatural, for which, if we wish to use a term derived from Christian conceptions, "sacramental" would be more fitting than "magical." Witness, for instance, the *Prayer to the Gods of the Night*, an invocation pronounced on the occasion of the sacrifice of a lamb whose entrails

are to be interpreted as a sign giving insight into the truth of things. The supplicant is standing on the roof of a temple, looking at a world asleep. It is a calm and dark night: even the moon and the brightest star (the morning star) are absent. The fire on the roof and the constellations in the sky are the only source of light, and to them the supplicant turns as operative sources of truth:

> They have retired, the great ones.
> The bolts are drawn, the locks in place.
> The noisy crowds are still and quiet,
> the open doors have now been closed.
>
> The gods and goddesses of the land—
> the Sun, the Moon, the Storm, the Morning-Star—
> have gone to where they sleep in heaven,
> leaving aside judgment and decree.
>
> Veiled is the night:
> the thoroughfares are dark and calm,
> the traveler invokes his god,
> claimants and plaintiffs are fast asleep.
>
> The one true judge, father of the fatherless,
> the Sun, has gone into his chambers.
>
> You, great gods of the night—
> the bright Fire, the netherworld god of War,
> the Pleiades, Orion, the Big Dipper,
> and the other constellations,
>
> may you stand by and then—
> in the divination I am about to make,
> in the lamb I will consecrate
> —place truth for me!

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From V. K. Shileiko, *Izvestiya Rossiyskoy Akademii Istorii Material'noy Kul'tury*, vol. 3 (1924)

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Nothing could be farther from an attempt at manipulation. There is trust in a specific cultural mechanism (divination through the sacrifice of a lamb), but this mechanism gives no special handle on power: if it conveys truth, it is because of the gods who are not asleep and who are asked, not coerced, to lend assistance.

If texts like the one just quoted give indication of a basic sincerity, they also seem to lay bare a surprising naïveté, which proclaims a fundamental impotence of the gods at the very time it seeks their assistance. How can one trust in gods who fall asleep? The myths are so replete with stories which are often outright demeaning for the gods that we can at least conclude that there was no apologetic defensiveness on this score

within the various polytheistic traditions. Their point of departure was so totally different that there was never even a trace of theistic doubt. The gods are perceived as beings who have a preferential access to the realm of the absolute, by virtue of special ontological qualities with which they are endowed (such as invisibility and immortality). The fact that they are a multitude, each limiting the other because each is associated with a specific aspect, implies that none is absolute. But they all have closer access to the absolute world of values, to that fate which ultimately controls the nature and destiny of everything. The "mystery" (to use a positive term, though some may prefer "absurdity") of this belief is that fate is absolute, except for personhood. That is why there is no piety or cult involving fate, save for a limited and partial exception in Egypt, mentioned above.

The gods are the links between the personal and the impersonal: piety is directed to them because they are the windows, in varying degrees of openness and transparency, onto the ultimate level of being and power. The sun in heaven and the fire on the rooftop are concrete embodiments of these windows onto something deeper, something that holds everything together: they are one degree removed from the inertia of fate, because they can and do lend help (heat and light) in a very concrete way. They are appropriate targets of our human piety because they mediate between the absolute and absolutely inert power of fate and the groping needs of humans. The *Prayer to the Gods of the Night,* which served as a starting point for these considerations, is particularly apt to show at the same time the complementarity of the gods in their function as windows onto the absolute: some gods sleep while others wake, but the net result is that some are always available, through an intrinsic and pervasive synergy process.

The religious experience of ancient Israel grew out of the framework of this polytheistic experience. I have already stressed that the Israelite tradition expressly underscores the relative lateness of its beginnings, which are situated at the core (geographically and chronologically) of the polytheistic tradition. Also, the nature of the polemical emphasis against polytheism, which grows almost exponentially

within Israel, implies, if nothing else, a dialectical interaction with polytheism, which would have influenced monotheism, at least in terms of the themes it was induced to accentuate. As repugnant as it may at first seem to some, a sympathetic knowledge of this spiritual environment, which clearly conditioned the development of Israel, may help us to understand the Israelite experience. The profound intensity of Israelite piety did not emerge full-blown out of nowhere; it is in fact the internal self-assessment of that tradition which shows a steady cultural growth of modes of consciousness, beginning with a plain and simple polytheistic state.

Without wishing to suggest any simplistic type of evolutionary scheme, it seems fair to say that Israelite piety appears to bring to full fruition, in some respects, what polytheistic piety had been earnestly and consistently striving for. In polytheism, it is the gods who, through their personal attributes, establish a personal link between the worshiper and the underlying, inert power of fate. In Israel, a single absolute and personal God seems to unify within himself the unboundedness of fate and the personal characterization of the gods. While the gods are windows onto the absolute, the God of Israel is perceived as the absolute who of his own volition opens himself to direct access—who is, as it were, his own window. Israelite piety vibrates with the wonder that such a full interaction may be possible: the concept of the "living God" may perhaps be seen in a new light that allows one to appreciate its emotional impact, whether or not one responds to it with a sense of personal involvement. Viewed thus, Israelite piety appears to be the crowning of the polytheistic experience rather than its dethroning.

CONCLUSION

The words of Sophocles give eloquent and sophisticated expression to the role of fate within a polytheistic ethos:

> Destiny guide me always,
> Destiny find me filled with reverence
> pure in word and deed.

Great laws tower above us, reared on high
born for the brilliant vault of heaven—
  Olympian sky their only father,
nothing mortal, no man gave them birth,
their memory deathless, never lost in sleep:
within them lives a mighty god, the god does
  not grow old.

Oedipus the King,
translated by Robert Fagles (1984) (954–962)

Appropriately, a tragic contrast emerges from Oedipus's experience, perhaps more than that found in any near eastern text stemming from the polytheistic experience:

What god,
what dark power leapt beyond all bounds,
beyond belief, to crush your wretched life?
(1435–1437)

Thus sings the chorus, to which Oedipus answers,

My destiny, my dark power, what a leap you
  made!

. . . .

Dark, horror of darkness
my darkness, drowning, swirling around me
crashing wave on wave—unspeakable,
  irresistible headwind, fatal harbor!
(1447–1453)

The dark night of the soul to which Sophocles gives such eloquent voice stems from the recognition that the primordial impersonality of fate can ultimately become total unknownness, symbolized by the stark imagery of darkness. Interestingly, the closest parallel comes not from the polytheistic Near East but from Israel, in such texts as the so-called confessions of Jeremiah or Job. Israelite piety is clearly no cheap insurance against suffering and disillusionment. Just as predictability in the polytheistic system does not mean total vision, so immediate personal accessibility to God in the Israelite experience does not mean that God is automatically within reach. It is a tortured spiritual itinerary that the new religious experience can map for its adherents, one that requires a profound interior coherence and sustained commitment. A recognition of these traits of ancient Israel leads to a firmer appreciation of its historical role. Both the perception of values and the response to them can be placed in a continuous and coherent line of cultural development.

Conversely, we may also be in a better position to recapture, through the kind of personal appropriation that is part and parcel of a humanistic endeavor, the fundamental values of ancient polytheism and to recognize their perhaps unsuspected survival in our own culture. Reflections of this ancient value system are found in our basic belief in the rational unity of a knowable world; in the perception of the essential congruence of the laws of nature and our intellectual ability to apprehend them; in the skepticism one has in accepting the ontological short circuit represented by inspiration and miracles; and in the certitude that our current inability to control the full spectrum of reality is a matter of quantitative reach, not of ontological capability. To the extent that we recognize any absolute value (whether ethical, logical, or otherwise), we share the basic belief in some single principle that underlies the multifaceted dimensions of reality, and to the extent that this principle is assumed to have a capacity for interaction, we perceive it in terms that are ultimately theistic, regardless of whether a corresponding terminology is employed.

Finally, it is perhaps deceptive if we think that the gods themselves are the one important element of ancient polytheism missing from our society. The perception that is at times projected within currently established religious cultures seems perfectly in tune with a conception that gives pride of place to values rather than to a personal, independent, and possibly "irrational" agent. The fact may be that the two perceptions tend to be in a more fluid interrelationship than we may think and that our own religious self may be more frequently divided between the two than we realize. It is to this internal spiritual antinomy, first fully articulated in the ancient Near East, that the great Spanish mystic quoted at the beginning of this article gave voice:

Alas! who can ever heal me?
Oh, that you, my God,
  may ever fully surrender yourself in truth
    to me!
Do not, I beg, send any longer
messengers who take your place
and do not know enough to tell my needs!

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SEE ALSO **Theologies, Priests, and Worship in Ancient Mesopotamia** (Part 8, Vol. III) and **Theology, Priests, and Worship in Canaan and Ancient Israel** (Part 8, Vol. III).

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