

At the origins of monotheism

A socio-epistemic confrontation in ancient Syro Mesopotamia

For UCLA M50B

The Origins of Judaism, Christianity and Islam

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What is known as monotheism may be seen, in its earliest manifestation, in the light of an epistemic confrontation of the biblical tradition with the system of knowledge that had developed in the great cities of Mesopotamia. The paper presents a view that is at variance with the communis opinio, both in terms of the nature of the confrontation and of its historical setting.

*As for the **nature of the confrontation**, I consider the notion of fate as being more central to Syro-Mesopotamian religion than normally acknowledged. Polytheism was a major intellectual feat in its attempt at breaking down the absolute into component parts, i.e., the deities that represent diverse elements of the world of nature. Fate had remained untouched by this process, and in this regard it may be seen as a form of monotheism ante litteram.*

*As for the **historical setting**, I consider the patriarchal tradition as encasing the epic memory of a Syro-Mesopotamian splinter group that detached itself from the land of the four banks at a time of de-urbanization in the middle Euphrates, and in the process lost its contacts with the organized systems of cult and divination and brought new life to the notion of fate now seen as a living absolute.*

*This presentation comes at a point in the course when one looks at the **founding figures**, and in particular Abraham. My approach puts the biblical patriarchal tradition in a different and very unconventional light, drawing not only on the biblical text and on historical records, but also on archaeology and ethnography.*