

Trendy Monotheism?

Ancient Near Eastern Models and Their Value in Elucidating ‘Monotheism’ in Ancient Israel¹

Gerlinde Baumann (Philipps-University Marburg, Germany and UP)

ABSTRACT

The article starts from the challenging theses in recent research in the field of ancient Near Eastern studies, according to which ‘monotheism’ is declared to be a well-known phenomenon in the ancient Near East. Although this assertion may be questionable, e.g., from the perspective of the science of religion, it encourages the possibility of a new approach to the study of ancient Israelite beliefs about the divine: Is it possible that the religion of the Old Testament is more closely related to ancient Near Eastern ‘monotheism,’ than ancient Israelite polytheism is related to ancient Near Eastern polytheism?

A THE PROBLEM: ‘MONOTHEISM’ IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST?

An essay under the title above presumes that there exists a phenomenon in the ancient Near East that one may classify as ‘monotheism’. By the concept of ‘monotheism’ is meant the belief that only a single deity exists.² Frequently, however, the religions of the ancient Near East are assumed to be polytheistic in nature. The first question that arises from these assumptions is how monotheism came to develop as a possibility in the ancient Near East at all. Therefore, we shall begin by looking at some of the ancient Near Eastern texts that, in a broad sense, have been perceived by scholars of the ancient Near East as exhibiting monotheistic tendencies.

‘Lord, who is greater than you, with whom can you be compared?
Great Hero, who is greater than you, with whom can you be compared?’

¹ This article is published as an outcome of Dr Baumann’s visit to the University of Pretoria in June-July 2005 as Research Associate of Prof Dirk Human, Department of Old Testament Studies, University of Pretoria. This is an extended version of her Habilitation presentation, held on 14 July 2004 in the Department of Protestant Theology at the Philipps-University in Marburg, Germany.

² Under this point, additional distinctions are helpful; for that, cf. below D or, e.g., Lang 1998.

Lord Nanna, who is greater than you, with whom can you be compared?
(*eršemma-Song of the god Nanna-Su-en; Old-Babylonian, 2000-1600 BCE*)³

‘Do not revere your gods, do not pray to your goddesses,
but seek the door of Namtara and bring a baked (loaf) to the front of it.’
(*Akkadian myth Atra-hasis, old Babylonian, 2000-1600 BCE*)⁴

‘I alone it is who will rule over the gods...’
(*Ugaritic Baal-Myth, 13th century BCE*)⁵

‘Whoever comes after me, trust in the god Nabû;
trust no other god!’
(*inscription of Bēl-tarši-ilumma, governor of Kalah/Nimrud;
neo-Assyrian, about 800 BCE*)⁶

‘Asshur is the totality of gods.’
(*neo-Assyrian personal name, 744 or 734 BCE*)⁷

‘You are the king of the gods, the god among the gods.’
(*of the god Sin, in the inscriptions of the neo-Babylonian king Nabonides, 556-539
BCE*)⁸

These verses are derived from texts of different literary genres: a hymn, two myths, two inscriptions, one record of a personal name. All the texts originate from Ugarit and Mesopotamia from the period before the Christian era. The differences in time are relative as the myths were preserved over a long time, and often we only have access to late versions. The texts all derive from the immediate cultural environment of ancient Israel. Yet the ‘ancient Near East’

³ Sumerian: `umun a-ba e-diri a-ba e-da-sú / ur-sag-gal a-ba e-diri a-ba (e-da-sú) / umun ^dnanna a-ba e-diri a-ba (e-da-sú)’ (Sjöberg 1960:44-54, *eršemma-song* no. 3, line 25-27); also translated in (e.g.): Falkenstein/von Soden 1953:80.

⁴ Akkadian: ‘e 𒀭𒀭𒀭-ap-l 𒀭𒀭𒀭 ha i-li-ku-un 𒀭 / e tu-s[a]-al-li- 𒀭𒀭𒀭 iš 𒀭𒀭𒀭 ta-ar-ku-un / 𒀭𒀭𒀭 nam-ta 𒀭𒀭𒀭 -r[a] ši-a ba-ab-šu / bi-l[a] e-p[í-t]a 𒀭𒀭𒀭 na 𒀭𒀭𒀭 qú-ud-mi-šu,’ *Atra-hasis I* vii, 378-381 (Shehata 2001:93-94, also with a synopsis of translations like, e.g., the one from Lambert/Millard 1969).

⁵ Ugaritic: ‘ahdy d ymlk ‘l ilm,’ CAT 1.4 VII 49b-52a.

⁶ Akkadian: ‘ma-nu ar-ku-ú a-na ^dAG na-at-kil a-na DINGIR šá-ni-ma la ta-tak-kil,’ from line 12 in the text Adad-nārārī III A.O.104.2002 (Grayson 1996:226-227).

⁷ Akkadian: ‘Gab-bu-DINGIR.MEŠ-ni- 𒀭𒀭𒀭+šur 𒀭,’ the name is mentioned in line 18 in a purchase contract found in Calah/Nimrud from the year 744 or 734 BCE (no. 18, ND 708, in: Deller/Fadhil 1993:262-263; tables 103-106).

⁸ Akkadian: ‘LUGAL DINGIR.MEŠ DINGIR.MEŠ šá DINGIR.MEŠ’. This is line 29 of the inscription on the ‘Elugalmasisa-cylinder’ of Nabonides (text no. 2.2. in: Schaudig 2001:350-353); for discussion, cf. Loretz 1997:59 (with footnote 263 where he also mentions text 3.1 2 III 40; DINGIR šá DINGIR^{meš}).

was in no way a homogenous cultural milieu. Geographically and chronologically there are significant variations that developed from the Mesopotamian culture. Ancient Israelite culture and religion are heirs to the culture and religion of Mesopotamia and Egypt and its roots also lie in the North-Western Semitic world of the second millennium BCE. The general development of Israelite religion is narrowly intertwined with the general development of the other religious traditions in this milieu during the first millennium BCE. For this reason the focus of this paper will be on the first millennium on the one hand and on the geographical stronghold of the Mesopotamian context on the other. Here we find extremely close cultural contacts, particularly between Israel in the monarchic period and the neo-Assyrian empire. The northern and southern kingdoms were vassals of Assyria and, after the northern kingdom revolted with the aim of achieving independence, the people were deported in 722 BCE. The southern kingdom came to a settlement with the Assyrians but even they were not spared deportation. The imperial replacement of Assyria, the neo-Babylonian empire, was responsible for the so-called 'exile' of the southern kingdom (587-539 BCE). The post-exilic entrenchment of the Persian culture and Egyptian influences will be left aside based on methodological considerations.

The earlier quoted lines from Mesopotamian sources represent by no means exceptional or rare texts. Claims about the singleness or uniqueness of the divine are found throughout three millennia of Mesopotamian texts prior to the Common Era. This destroys the popular view, which had been the unquestioned norm for a long time in the history of biblical interpretation. It relates to the belief that the biblical faith was unique in the ancient Near Eastern world in its insistence that only one God must be worshipped, namely YHWH, the god of Israel. Presently, and ever-increasingly, however, research on the ancient Near East encounters the kind of texts that parallel the Old Testament with its ideas of worshipping only one god.

A considerable number of examples of what is called 'monotheism' in ancient Near Eastern texts has been discovered in recent scholarship. In his review on Simo Parpola, orientalist Jerrold Cooper says that 'Parpola is impelled by an agenda, conscious or not, that transcends Assyriology and has entered into a realm removed from the terrain of familiar scholarly discourse.' (2000:442) Cooper then provides a cursory overview of this with regard to the region of the ancient Near East: 'Wilfried Lambert began this decade with a discussion of Marduk-monotheism [Lambert 1990]. In 1992, Giorgio Buccellati suggested that pre-Sargonic Akkadian religion was ancestral to Hebrew monotheism [Buccellati 1992]; and in 1993, the year that Parpola announced that the cult of Asshur was the model for Yahwistic monotheism, J.-M. Durand wrote that Adad of Aleppo was the prototype for both Marduk and YHWH, and A. Finet found YHWH himself at Mari [Durand 1993:60f.; Finet 1993].' (Cooper 2000:442) He concludes with the words: 'And all this from Assyriologists, not Old Testament scholars gleaning in Assyriological fields!'

If one reads the related literature in ancient Near Eastern research, one gets the impression that the ancient Near East was a cultural context filled with religions characterized by monotheistic tendencies. There is only one related discipline of ancient Near Eastern studies that is not infected by this trend; this is Old Testament science. In this discipline, the century-old consensus regarding monotheism in Israel has become untenable: archaeological discoveries leave no doubt that in ancient Israel more than one god were worshipped. At YHWH's side can be found, after the discoveries at Kuntilet 'Ajrud and Kirbet el-Qom (in Judah, situated in the Negev) during the monarchic period, Asherah, who was worshipped as his consort (Keel & Uehlinger 1993:237-282). In addition, a great hall of goddess figurines attests to the fact that the worship of YHWH during the monarchic period, and particularly in the family cults, was not without alternatives. The research of Bernard Lang and Manfred Weippert frequently refers to polytheism in pre-exilic Israel (Lang 1983, 1998; Weippert 1997; cf. also Hartenstein 2003).

A polytheistic Israel surrounded by monotheistic neighbouring religions? This is surely a curious and perplexing image. Based on this frustrating scenario I wish to discern the nature of Israelite religion and its adequate designation. A cursory view of the material of ancient Near Eastern funds and texts has already been provided. How does one now proceed to broaden the scope of the inquiry?

When the historical analysis of the Old Testament is taken seriously, models should be found that allow one to see ancient Israel and its forms of religious life as being inextricably part of the ancient Near Eastern cultural milieu. Concepts can be found with the aid of the story of the ancient Near East vis-à-vis ancient Israel with all their similarities and differences determined: First the concepts of 'monotheism' and 'polytheism' will be discussed (B). Then follows a discussion in ancient Near Eastern studies regarding monotheism in Assyria (C). A repeated elucidation, now from the perspective of the science of religion, follows (D) and finally, from the new perspective attained, a renewed attempt will be made to think about the religions of the ancient Orient and ancient Israel together (E) in order to produce a synthesis and conclusion (F).

B A HISTORY OF THE CONCEPTS 'MONOTHEISM' AND 'POLYTHEISM'

The history of the concepts of mono- and polytheism has being thoroughly worked out and the relevant results from the science of religion are listed here (cf. Ahn 1993; Gladigow 1998, 2002; Lang 1998; Stolz 1996, 2001). With a view to the Old Testament and the ancient Near East, several aspects come to the fore (Stolz 1996; Lang 1998):

1. The concept 'monotheism' itself originated during the period of the Enlightenment. In that context it was related to the philosophical-religious

debate concerning the discussion about the relationship between theism and deism, and not as a descriptive category for ancient Israelite religion.

2. In the term ‘polytheism’, the concept of monotheism finds an antonym. Both concepts are construed in a reflexive relationship. This antithesis can also be worked out in connection with the Old Testament. Old Testament monotheism is contrasted with the polytheism of the ancient Near Eastern cultural milieu. The latter was known mainly through the biblical texts since Mesopotamia was not yet researched during the beginning of the Enlightenment era. Also the question about the truth and dignity of their religion comes to figure. The monotheism of the Old Testament is considered to be the true religion, which stands opposed to the false religion of Canaan. Monotheism is seen as the revelation of God while polytheism is seen as the result of deifying nature. Under polytheism is understood a multitude of deities according to the phenomenon in Greece or the foreign gods mentioned in the Old Testament.

The designations of monotheism and polytheism became part of a developmental interpretation of the history of religion. In this history, polytheism is believed to represent a distortion or degradation of an original monotheism. Israelite religion itself is seen as developing from a lower stage of polytheistic religion to a higher and more pure religion (monotheism). In this way the concept of polytheism became closely associated with monotheism in that it was taken to represent something antithetical to it that was subordinate, underdeveloped and less true. An exception to the rule would be in Egyptology where Jan Assmann associated polytheism with openness and tolerance (Assmann 1998, 2003).

3. Monotheism is understood as the type of religion encountered in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In some cultural circles there are pertinent references to ‘the Christian monotheism’. Here one finds a high degree of identification between Christianity and monotheism. It is sometimes difficult to imagine that one’s own religious roots lie in another and altogether alien religious tradition.

These two centuries of the history of the concepts have left their outworking on the present. Along with this there are the various relations between the two concepts and their adaptations that cannot be discussed in detail here⁹.

⁹ For example, the debate about ‘history of Israelite religion vs. Old Testament theology’ (Baldermann 1995) or the discussion about the relationship between monotheism and violence (Manemann 2003; Söding 2003; Düringer 2004). The term ‘syncretism’ is not of much help in the discussion, as may be illustrated by Berner’s article (Berner 2001:145). The term is used for a broad variety of phenomena, like, e.g., ‘Einfluß (einer Religion auf eine andere); Vereinigung (zweier Religionen); Eingliederung (fremder Gottheiten in eine Religion);

What is more important for our present discussion is the use of the term polytheism to describe the religions of the ancient Near East. With this the sources to the ancient Near East are taxed with a heavy baggage of association with the connotations of inferiority, deviation, heterodoxy and inadequacy. At best the polytheism of the ancient Near East is considered a relatively minor religious tradition in the multiplicity of the phenomenon in the world and the multitude of deities portrayed therein. Maybe the timely turning of the tide in ancient Near Eastern studies with regard to the use of the concept of monotheism should be understood from this background: after the full witness of the dynamic, evolving and highly complex history of Mesopotamian culture became apparent, the inadequacy of the term to describe the nature of the religion became clear when it was realized that it carried many negative associations such as, *inter alia*, primitiveness.

C SIMO PARPOLA'S 'ASSYRIAN MONOTHEISM' AND THE REACTION TO THE PROPOSAL

What can ancient Near Eastern studies do in view of the dilemma? Avoid using the concept altogether? Talk about Babylonian or Mesopotamian 'monotheism' is certainly uncommon. At most there is reference to a 'monotheistic search', 'tendency' or 'trajectory'; the talk is about 'selective' monotheism. Reference to monotheism without classification, however, is at last found in the writings of the Finn Simo Parpola in his courageous depiction of neo-Assyrian religion. In doing so he caused a heavy reaction that is of great relevance to our question. Therefore a short discussion of Parpola's views will now be presented through which we will join ancient Near Eastern research with our theme of monotheism.

Simo Parpola is a highly esteemed and undoubtedly very competent researcher in his field who, in Helsinki, leads a large research project aimed at the publication of neo-Assyrian texts. He wrote his thesis on Assyrian monotheism in 1993.¹⁰ In this, he put forward his thesis in connection with an introduction to the phenomenon of neo-Assyrian prophecy. Parpola's thesis is that during the neo-Assyrian period, the god Asshur was worshipped as the one and only deity in whom all other divinities were assimilated. In personal names dated to the 8th century BCE, Asshur is implied to be the 'totality of deities'. The text in question was quoted in the introductory section of this article.

As a proponent of this thesis, Parpola does not stand alone, as is clear from an inquiry into the history of research on the ancient Near East. Not explicitly referred to are the predecessors of Parpola, among whom we find

Gleichsetzung (verschiedener Götter); Verschmelzung (verschiedener Gottheiten).'

¹⁰ The most elaborate is the hundred-page introduction in volume IX of the 'State Archives of Assyria'. It was written in 1993 but published subsequently in 1997 (Parpola 1997).

Benno Landsberger (1965 [1926]) as well as Wolfram von Soden (1985) with the thesis of ‘monotheiotetism’. With this term von Soden designated the idea that all the deities of Sumeria, Babylonia and Assyria were amalgamated into one abstraction of divineness (Göttlichkeit), i.e. one θεϊότης.

This thesis has as underlying grounds the fact that at around 800 BCE we find in the texts references to a pair of deities who, as god and goddess, are represented together as *ilūtum*, as ‘divineness’ (‘Göttlichkeit’; Landsberger 1965 [1926]). Behind this thesis of Landsberger stands the plea to allow the conceptual frame of reference of the Babylonians to be understood on its own terms and in its own context.¹¹ In view is the interpretation of the Akkadian term *ilūtum* (von Soden 1985:8, 11), which does not fit the purpose. More local concepts are surely non-existent, because in the ancient Near East no reflexive discourse for the phenomenon of one’s own culture is present. There is no theorizing. Terms were utilized in a different manner that we ourselves do today as heirs of the Greek philosophical background. In the ancient Near East there was no concern with producing a precise and delineated clarification of concepts. Instead, people were more inclined to a circumscribed description of phenomena by representing it with the aid of other words from the same semantic field, the so-called ‘stereometrical way of representation.’

As a matter of fact, therefore, there is no possibility of utilizing ancient Near Eastern terminology in the description of Mesopotamian religion since abstract descriptive theoretical vocabulary is non-existent in the discourse of that culture. Consequently, most scholars researching the field grope back at the conventional terminology of mono- and polytheism. These concepts can be wider differentiated with other terms like henotheism and monolatry. Here the concern is with the exclusivity of the worship of a particular god and not with religion as a whole. These concepts do not allow us to advance any further in our attempt to deal with the problem of determining adequate terminology for the description of Mesopotamian religion.

The widespread reaction to Parpola’s thesis in ancient Near Eastern studies show that, apart from Parpola, none will speak of ‘Assyrian monotheism’.¹² In the review, which was quite elaborate, it is pointed out that one clearly finds monotheistic tendencies (Frahm 2000/2001; Weippert 2002). It is once again the already sketched phenomenon of some kind of softening the terms. This, however, is of little use in the elucidation of concepts.

¹¹ Thus it was amazing that for these purposes a *Greek* term was used in the classification.

¹² The outstanding and to some extent incomparable rank of the god Asshur in the neo-Assyrian pantheon especially in the time of (704-681 BCE) is not debated with this statement (cf. Vera Chamaza 2002).

Therefore we shall now look to the science of religion since it is that discipline which is concerned with the determination of the meaning of terminology used in the study of religion.

D THE RELIGIO-HISTORICAL CLARIFICATION OF ‘POLY-THEISM’: BURKHARD GLADIGOW

Burkhard Gladigow, a scientist of religion, has a range of stimulating proposals for the description of ancient Near Eastern religion. He defines polytheism as:

‘eine Religionsform ..., in der ein Handeln einer Mehrzahl persönlich vorgestellter Götter konzipiert ist. Das Handeln der Götter wird dargestellt als aufeinander bezogen, auf die Welt gerichtet, die Menschen betreffend. Von der bloßen Mehrzahl von Götterkulten in einer bestimmten Region unterscheidet sich eine polytheistische Religion durch eine ‘Binnenstruktur’ ihres Götterapparats, durch ein in sich gegliedertes und durch ein Handlungssystem bestimmtes Pantheon.’ (Gladigow 1998:321)

Polytheism is a ‘Reflexionsmedium’ which absorbs ‘das spannungsreiche Verhältnis von politischer Autonomie und kultureller Gemeinsamkeit’ by establishing a genealogical link between the deities of a number of cities. Constituent elements of Polytheism are ‘mehrere Aufmerksamkeitsträger in einem Pantheon’, which are put forward in models ‘von Kooperation und Konflikt’ (Gladigow 2002:10; 1998:323). Also important in this regard is the fact that the deities take on different roles and are not all of equal status. Notwithstanding the ever-increasing observations of distinctions and development in the religion of Mesopotamia over the three millenniums before the Christian era, solving the problem is possible as far as is concerned adapting the definition of Gladigow’s to the classification of these forms of religion. But does this also apply to the Israelite context?

In his broad conceptualization of polytheism, Gladigow also integrates ‘henotheistische Optionen’, i.e. the local, temporal or private¹³ worship of one god (Gladigow 2002:12, 14–15). He describes this as an evolutionary process, as a development that wrestles with polytheism.

‘Das religionshistorische Material zeigt, daß gerade die entwickelten polytheistischen Systeme im allgemeinen ‘insuläre Monotheismen’ ohne Mühe integrieren konnten.’ (Gladigow 1998:327)

These ‘insulated monotheisms’ do not necessarily drop out of the polytheistic system, as it is very open and competent at integration. Presupposing such forms of monotheism is

¹³ Gladigow mentions at this point (2002:14) the religion of the Egyptian Pharaoh Akenaton (14th century BCE).

‘eine Ausdifferenzierung der polytheistischen Systeme in verschiedene Göttertypen mit höchst unterschiedlichen Wirkungsbereichen und Geltungsansprüchen’ (Gladigow 1998:327).¹⁴

At this point of our inquiry, we can have a closer look at the above quoted ancient Near Eastern texts. Do we really find monotheism in them, or to which kind of theology do they belong? The Sumerian *eršemma*-song for Nanna-Su’*en* is part of a broader tradition of these songs. Although in this particular song only Nanna-Su’*en* is approached, there are other *eršemma*-songs in which other deities are praised, as Falkenstein/von Soden emphasize (1953:22).¹⁵

With regard to the seemingly monotheistic text from the Akkadian *Atrahasis* myth, parallel verses exist in which the same request is given to the audience to worship only Adad (II ii 9-12; 23-26) and not Namtar (as said in I vii, 378-381 and also in 393-396). This advice is related to the context of a plague and explained by von Soden. The God Enki’s

‘ganz ungewöhnliche Ratschläge, die Atramchasis über die Ältesten den geplagten Menschen übermittelte, gipfelten in der Aufforderung, den Göttern die ihnen zustehenden Opfer und Gebete zu verweigern, von dieser Maßnahme aber jedesmal den Gott auszunehmen, der an der Plage besonders intensiv mitwirkte. Diesem sollten Opfer und Gebete in einem ganz einmaligen Ausmaß dargebracht werden, um ihn zu veranlassen, an die Stelle der Plagen Segenshandlungen wieder ganz besonderer Art zu setzen. Die jeweilige Plage wurde dadurch unwirksam, und den übrigen Göttern bleibt nichts anderes übrig als zu ihren Opfern zurückzukehren’ (von Soden 1994:615-616).

Therefore, we should call this form of worshipping a deity not monotheism, but more adequately situative monolatry.

The verse from the Ugaritic Baal-myth is to be understood in the context of Baal’s fight for supremacy over the other deities of the Ugaritic pantheon. This clearly mirrors not a monotheistic, but a polytheistic setting, where we can watch how the power and therefore the role of single deities come to a change.

The neo-Assyrian inscription of Bēl-tarši-ilumma is described by Frahm:

‘Der markanteste Hinweis auf einen rudimentären Mono- [sic!] – oder vielleicht besser: Henotheismus, der sich im assyrischen Schrifttum ausfindig machen läßt, betrifft nicht den Gott Assur, sondern Nabû ...’ (Frahm 2000/2001:33-34).

¹⁴ Different aspects of the structure of the Mesopotamian pantheon are examined by Krebernik (2002:35-40).

¹⁵ ‘Die hier gebotenen *erschemma*-Lieder, die alle der altbabylonischen Stufe angehören, sind Lieder an die Großen des babylonischen Pantheons’ (Falkenstein/von Soden 1953:22).

Although this is true, the context of the inscription makes it unlikely to ask the reader to worship a different deity: The inscription is written on a statue in the Nabû temple in Calah, showing the worshipping Bēl-tarši-ilumma. So this kind of religious belief could best be addressed as ‘monolatry’ or ‘insulated monotheism’.

The neo-Assyrian personal name Parpola uses to underline his notion of neo-Assyrian monotheism has been commented on in the review (Frahm 2000/2001:33; Weippert 2002:6). Gabbi-ilāni-Aššur was the treasurer of the queen’s household. His name cannot only be translated as ‘Asshur is all the gods’, like Parpola does it (2000:172), but also as ‘All Gods are Asshur’, like Hunger proposes (in: Radner 1999:414). This allows the conclusion that the existence of other gods and goddesses is not denied. We can also find comparative examples of personal names in the prosopography for the neo-Assyrian time: There is just a ‘Gabbu-ilāni’ (‘The gods are all’; ‘All Gods’, in: Radner 1999:414), ‘Gabbu-Adad’ (‘Adad is all’; 412) or ‘Gabbu-Aia’ (‘Ea is all’; 412). These other attempts to put one single deity in the place of the whole pantheon weaken the point that there is a definitive monotheism of the god Asshur in neo-Assyrian time. Again, we should better speak about henotheism or monolatry.

The last example, the neo-Babylonian inscription of Nabonides, praises the uniqueness of the God Sin. What is said about Sin has to be seen in the context that we here find an inscription, which has been written on the occasion of the reopening of a temple of Sin, which was restored by Nabonides. It is obvious that no other deity is praised in such a context. So this also appears as a case of situative monolatry.

A careful consideration of these examples suggests that we should not speak of ‘monotheism’ in the strict sense of the term in the ancient Near East. It is, however, possible to find texts with ‘insulated monotheism’ or ‘monolatry’; this seems to be an option in the frame of polytheism to strengthen the position of specific deities in some contexts.

One reason for the change in the religious system might have been the ‘professionalization’ of religion as possibly manifested in the dual nature of the Mesopotamian God lists (Gladigow 2002:9-10). This aspect is characteristic of a ‘sophisticated polytheism’ (Gladigow 2002:10; Krebernik 2002:35 with reference to Lambert 1975). From this standard of religion the struggle for universalization can be completed and the sphere of influence of the deity can be extended beyond its original sphere. Only with this step is the separation from polytheism complete – and not just with the proclamation of the worship of one god or the predication of the uniqueness of a deity.¹⁶

¹⁶ This is one reason why the above quoted Sumerian and Akkadian texts should not easily be interpreted as ‘monotheistic’ texts. Gladigow refers to soteriology – as a

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This thesis of the *development* of monotheism from the polytheistic variety distinguishes Gladigow's perspective from the mouthpiece of many theologians. Here, after all, monotheism is still seen repeatedly as essentially involving a *break* with polytheism.¹⁷ The result of the overview of the history of the concept is that an ancient 'Fremdgottverehrung' is put aside in the Old Testament and the new religion of the exclusive worship of YHWH makes its way through. From a dialectical-theological perspective the revelation of the one God spells the end for polytheism. However, Gladigow's model views this process in a different way. According to his view the religion of Israel developed from a temporary, local or private worship of one god. This implies a serious modification with regard to the dating of Israelite monotheism: the historical point from which we can speak of monotheism was not, e.g., the pre-exilic developed Deuteronomistic proclamation of the exclusiveness of the faith in YHWH, but post-exilic religion with, among other constitutive elements, its universalizing of YHWH.

Hence our view is shifted from Mesopotamia and is becoming more focused on ancient Israel. The period under consideration now lies firmly in the first millennium BCE. Can we observe during the first millennium a development in the religions of both empires – Assyria and Babylonia – which links with Israelite religion? Here some aspects will be mentioned which, in the present discussion of monotheism in Israel, have attracted little or no attention. Firstly, we shall look at two general views on the religious traditions of Mesopotamia mentioned above.

When one looks for the Assyrian and Babylonian 'theology' with abstract theological concepts, the dual nature of the lists of deities provides a source of richness.¹⁸ One encounters these lists in the writings of the first millennium BCE but earlier examples can be traced back all the way to the third millennium BCE. In these lists one finds for the most part Sumerian names of deities with Akkadian names following. An overview of the Semitic pantheon of the Akkadians and of those who came after them, the Babylonians and Assyrians, reveals a circle of 'great' active gods limited to fewer than twenty in all, whereas the older Sumerian pantheon had over two thousand deities of whom many had faded by then. The compilers and editors of the lists of deities now attempted to

possible second factor of conflict that underlines the attempt to integrate monotheism and polytheism – with its elements of 'conversion (and confession),' all of which is foreign to polytheism (Gladigow 2002:11).

¹⁷ This view is found in the direction with the arguments from biblical texts, and here specifically the Deuteronomistic perspective. An example of this, it seems to me, is found in the principal openness for the newer thesis that may be seen in Müller (2002). Other ways of speaking were, e.g., developed by Albertz 1978, 1992; Lang 1983, 1998; Weippert 1997; Gerstenberger 2002 and Wacker 2004.

¹⁸ For the God lists, cf. Lambert 1971.

assimilate the greater Sumerian world of deities into the smaller Akkadian one. In ancient Near Eastern research this phenomenon is described with the concept of ‘equalizing theology’ (‘Gleichsetzungstheologie’; cf. von Soden 1985:8). The example is in no sense a quasi-automatic equalizing as that which Wilfred Lambert had worked out (Lambert 1975)¹⁹. Also the ‘greater gods’ of the Sumerian pantheon are identified with their Akkadian counterparts, under whom the lesser deities are subsumed and ordered.

This could have been a model for the Old Testament, as in the context where YHWH is identified with El or Baal. It is also conceivable that this ‘equalizing theology’ in Israel became wider developed and was adapted into a unique form; in relatively old texts the attributes of a host of deities were assimilated into YHWH, e.g. aspects of a storm god and a sun god.

It also seems that throughout the first millennium BCE there had been a tradition of ‘personal piety’. Here deities or pairs of deities are addressed in certain situations as though they were the only gods (cf. Vorländer 1975; Krebernik 2002). In scriptural form this is found in personal names, prayers and devotions²⁰. The gods and goddesses are addressed through repeated formulaic variations in which the names of deities are often interchangeable. Traces of a similar kind of ‘personal piety’ can be found in the Old Testament, e.g., in the wisdom literature and in the psalms.

It is quite possible that one finds in Mesopotamia monolatristic tendencies or ‘insulated monotheism’ in the world of the gods.²¹ These derive from concrete historical situations, one of which will now be cursively sketched. The god Marduk worked his way up throughout the third and second millennium until he became head of the pantheon in Babylonia (Sommerfeld 1982, 1989). The Babylonian pantheon was taken over hardly modified by the Assyrians. In the Assyrian pantheon the god Asshur had an extraordinary position. This was, as Lambert pointed out, because Asshur was strongly connected with the locality. ‘Asshur’ was also understood as the *numen* of the rock that arose imposingly from the Tigris, on which the city of Asshur is placed (Lambert 1983). The deity is therefore not mobile. He is a genuine Assyrian figure and remains resistant throughout to a full integration in the subsequent taking over of the pantheon by Babylonia. Asshur has no mythical placing and no family, and when he was brought into the Babylonian pantheon, he was simply identified with Marduk or Anu.

Mesopotamian deities could also, as is clear in the example of Marduk, make a career move. And with Asshur this gives us a deity who – because of

¹⁹ For the equalizing theology in ancient Anatolia, cf. Wilhelm 2002.

²⁰ Krebernik (2002:44) speaks here of henotheism.

²¹ Krebernik (2002:43-44); he mentions here Enlil, Marduk, Asshur, Ninurta/Nabu and Sin.

his being bound to a locality – has an exceptional position. Might this form a parallel with YHWH of Zion?

F IMPLICATIONS FOR THE OLD TESTAMENT

What I have attempted with this demonstration was the provisioning of examples of the veneration of one deity in Israel's cultural milieu. It is applicable to a variety of levels of religion that can be discerned in ancient Israel.²² On the level of 'official religion' we can point to the special position of YHWH up to the time of post-exilic monotheism. On the level of family or individual piety, Israel can be considered to be part of the tradition in which one god or pairs of deities were worshipped in a specific socio-religious context.

So far in this contribution the main focus has been on 'ancient Israel'. Now I want to conclude by returning to the Old Testament. Wherein lies the difference? Ancient Israel is an epoch, a historical entity, while the Old Testament is a corpus of texts. In the discussion of monotheism, and in the comparison with ancient Near Eastern sources, the literary character of the Old Testament must not be lost from view. The Old Testament in its entirety as a closed and subsequently much reworked literary work belongs to a different source genre than the ancient Near Eastern texts. These indeed underwent a longer history of development behind which are, for example, diverse myths and lists of deities from the library of Assurbanipal from the seventh-century BCE, and these were not part of a closed collection. These texts were not as a whole – as in the case of the Old Testament – edited, reworked and adapted to reflect the latest theological developments.

I close with this thesis: For the most part of ancient Israel's history, it is appropriate to speak of a polytheistic religion, in which was found a broadened 'insulated Yahwistic monotheism'. Religious monotheism only comes to us when we restrict our attention to selected texts and ignore others like 1 Kgs 22; Pss 82, 89, Job 1-2 and *passim* containing the motif of a divine council. Monotheism exists in many Old Testament texts, but it does so as a phenomenon of edited religious literature. Only in retrospect does the transition between the different stages of polytheism to monotheism appear as involving a break, after which no streaks of polytheism can be found in Israelite religion. As I intended to show by the parallels to ancient Near Eastern religion, the historical development of ancient Israelite religion has probably been notably longer and far more complex than the Old Testament authors would like us to believe. This is, however, not because the Old Testament gives a 'false picture' of what happened, but because it has been reworked time and again and in its present state mirrors more or less the final stage in the development of Israel's religion.

²² Cf. the literature mentioned above in note 17.

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Gerlinde Baumann, Philipps-University Marburg, Germany; Fachbereich
Evangelische Theologie, Lahntor 3, 35032 Marburg, tel. ++49-+6184-63281.
E-mail: baumann@staff.uni-marburg.de