

Book Excerpts

Abraham's Religion: A Comparative Exploration

by John H. Walton

Editor's Note: John H. Walton (PhD, Hebrew Union College) is professor of Old Testament at Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois. He writes and speaks extensively on reading the Old Testament in its ancient context, and he's become a go-to scholar for understanding the conceptual world of the Hebrew mind. This short excerpt is taken from the second edition of Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament (Baker Academic, 2018, pp. 112–114). Used by permission, www.bakerpublishinggroup.com. See the ad on p. 34). In his chapter on that ancient religious world, Walton distinguishes the national "cosmic" gods of the State religion from the "personal" ancestral gods of a family's religion. In this excursus, the family religion of the migrant Abraham resonates with the ancestral orientation of Africa and Asia. This new heuristic may be helpful for exploring inter-religious frontiers today.

The information that has been presented here concerning family religion in the ancient Near East now offers us a new perspective for exploring the religious experience of Abraham.

T. Jacobsen has identified the primary development within Mesopotamian religion during the second millennium as the idea of a "personal god," which van der Toorn has shown is to be understood as the equivalent to the family god.¹ Typically the role of personal god was played by minor deities,² though it is not impossible that the great cosmic deities could so function. In return for obedience and worship, these deities provided for the well-being of their worshippers.

Close and personal relations—relations such as he had to the authorities in his family: father, mother, older brother and sister—the individual had only to one deity, to his personal god. The personal god was usually some minor deity in the pantheon who took a special interest in a man's family or had taken a fancy to the man himself. In a sense, and probably this is the original aspect, the personal god appears as the personification of a man's luck and success.³

It is clear from the Mesopotamian texts that this deity was not worshiped exclusively, but he did dominate the personal aspect of the individual's religious practice. "To his personal god, then, before any other a man owed worship and obedience."⁴

While this bears little resemblance to philosophical monotheism, it may have often taken the appearance of a practical monotheism (whether monolatry or henotheism).⁵ It is this trend more than any other that characterizes the period

during which the patriarchs emerged from Mesopotamia. The Hebrew Bible makes clear that monotheism was not part of Abraham's religious heritage. Abraham was of general Semitic stock, described in the Pentateuch as "Aramaean" (Gen. 25:20; 28:5; Deut. 26:5). Joshua 24:2 and 14 assert that the relatives of Abraham, including his father, served other gods, and the text of Genesis gives us no reason to question that assessment. Jacob has to urge his company to put away their other gods (Gen. 35:2–4), and *teraphim*, the images of the ancestral family gods,⁶ are important in Laban's religious practices (Gen. 31). It is clear, then, that the biblical record does not attribute monotheism of any sort to the family of Abraham. In addition, we would search in vain for any passage in which Abraham or any of the patriarchs denies the existence of other gods. Nevertheless, the perspective of the biblical text is that all of the worship of Abraham that is recorded is focused on a single deity, though that deity is called by different names. The Bible, however, nowhere explicitly insists that this is the only God that Abraham ever worshiped. It can be safely inferred from the biblical data that Abraham showed a distinct preferential loyalty for a single god.

Is it possible that Abraham's perception of Yahweh/El Shaddai would have been similar to the typical Mesopotamian's perception of his personal deity? The way in which Abraham and his God interact would certainly suit the paradigm of relationship with a personal god in Mesopotamia. Yahweh provides for Abraham and protects him, while obedience and loyalty are given in return. One major difference, however, is that our clearest picture of the personal god in Mesopotamia comes from the many laments that are offered as individuals seek favors from deity or complain about his neglect of them. There is no hint of this in Abraham's approach to Yahweh. In the depiction in the text, Abraham maintains an elevated view of deity that is much more characteristic of the overall biblical view of deity than it is of the Mesopotamian perspective. On the whole, however, it is not impossible, and may even be likely, that Abraham's understanding of his relationship to Yahweh, in the beginning at least, was similar to the Mesopotamian idea of the personal god. In Mesopotamian language, Abraham would have been described as having "acquired a god."⁷ That he was led to a new land and separated from his father's household would have effectively cut any ties with previous deities

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(located in city and family) and opened the way for Yahweh to be understood as the only deity to which Abraham had any obligation. By making a break with his land, his family, and his inheritance, Abraham was also breaking all of his religious ties. In his new land Abraham would have no territorial gods; as a new people he would bring no family gods; having left his country he would have no national or city gods; and it was Yahweh who filled this void, becoming “the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,” “the God of the Fathers.”⁸ But it is only in Israel, Jacobsen observes, that the idea of the personal god made the transition from the personal realm to the national realm.⁹ Van der Toorn adds, “Family religion was the ground from which national religion eventually sprang.”¹⁰

Endnotes

¹ K. van der Toorn, *Family Religion in Babylonia, Syria and Israel: Continuity and Change in the Forms of Religious Life* (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 3–4.

² Van der Toorn, *Family Religion*, 78.

³ T. Jacobsen, “Mesopotamia,” in H. Frankfort, H. A. Frankfort, J. A. Wilson, and T. Jacobsen, *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), 203; cf. T. Abusch,

“Ghost and God: Some Observations on a Babylonian Understanding of Human Nature,” in *Self, Soul and Body in Religious Experience*, ed. A. Baumgarten, J. Assmann, and G. Stroumsa (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 382.

⁴ Jacobsen, “Mesopotamia,” 204.

⁵ For summary discussion see N. Fox, “Concepts of God in Israel and the Question of Monotheism,” in *Text, Artifact, and Image: Revealing Ancient Israelite Religion*, ed. G. Beckman and T. Lewis (Providence: Brown University Press, 2006), 326–45. More extensive discussion can be found in M. S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Smith, *God in Translation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010); Smith, *Where the Gods Are* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

⁶ T. Lewis, “Teraphim,” in *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible (DDD)*, 2nd Edition, edited by K. van der Toorn, B. Becking, and P. W. van der Horst (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 844–50; K. van der Toorn, “The Nature of the Biblical Teraphim in the Light of the Cuneiform Evidence,” *CBQ* 52 (1990): 203–22.

⁷ Van der Toorn, *Family Religion*, 113; T. Jacobsen, *Treasures of Darkness* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 155–56.

⁸ Van der Toorn, *Family Religion*, 72–73.

⁹ Jacobsen, *Treasures of Darkness*, 164.

¹⁰ Van der Toorn, *Family Religion*, 265.

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