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MONOTHEISM AS THE PREDECESSOR OF POLYTHEISM IN SUMERIAN RELIGION

I

THE Sumerians were probably the first people to emerge from barbarism some time before 4000 B.C. From them we obtain the earliest written information concerning the religion of mankind. Now it is obvious that a people so far advanced in culture as to live in organized society, to create good architecture, excellent pottery and to invent a written script, were far advanced beyond what the anthropologists call primitive and primary cultures. Australian, Tasmanian and American aborigines of to-day are still far more primitive than the races which founded civilizations in the valleys of the Euphrates and the Nile. Here we have a talented race emerging into a real culture about 4000 B.C. It may be argued that we cannot get at primitive religion with such advanced material. That may be true, but we have in the valley of the Euphrates an immensely ancient record of the progress of human religion; what is more their concepts can be read in the most primitive pictographic inscriptions. On the Map of Lower Mesopotamia you may see the locations of some of the great prehistoric cities of the Sumerians, latterly occupied by the Babylonian Semites. Ur, seat of the Moon-God in the South, north of it Erech, seat of the cult of Anu, the god of heaven and father of all the gods, above it Nippur, seat of the cult of Enlil, the Earth-God, and near Babylon, Kish, seat of the cult of the Earth-mother goddess. Eridu, seat of the Water-God, lay twelve miles south-west of Ur. The cults of Erech, Nippur and Eridu, or sky, earth and water, formed the trinity of their pantheon.

Some of these sites have been excavated right down to virgin soil. Their last occupants were the Arabs of the Baghdad Caliphate. Consequently the excavator descends here through the ruins of states and empires, through the débris of many peoples over a period of at least 5,000 years until he reaches palæolithic culture on virgin soil. In doing this with three hundred workmen at Kish, over a period of twelve years, I came to the conclusion that the vast Sumerian polytheistic system was preceded by monotheism. This conclusion was also made more clear to me by the excavations of the Germans at Erech and

a city Shuruppak, between Nippur and Erech. To show you the line of evidence which led me to posit monotheism as the forerunner of the whole vast Sumerian pantheon let me use our own results at Kish. There we found a table of stratifications from the age of Alexander the Great at the top right down through 10 metres to plain level. Then through 6 metres to modern water level. Then through 3 metres to virgin soil. Sumerian civilization begins at virgin soil and ends considerably above plain level. There are excavations down to water level among streets and buildings not later than 3500 B.C. These show the sand line deposit precipitated by a great flood which destroyed the city. At Kish pictographic tablets begin just above virgin soil, the oldest writings from the human hand, the earliest statements about the religious mind of man which will probably ever be recovered. This is real consecutive writing, and not long after the first rude pictographic period. At Erech a large number of inscriptions of this first stage of writing which I date about 4000 B.C., were recovered. We have, therefore, considerable evidence about their economic conditions and religion. Kish produced only the one tablet (see Fig. 2) from this first stage of writing. Now what do the Erech tablets tell us about the gods and the pantheon? We know from inscriptions of about 3000 B.C. that the Sumerian pantheon already contained about 750 deities. It is plain from my discovery of 300 tablets at Kish from a period a little later than the primitive pictographic period that the pantheon there consisted of only the Sky-God, the Earth-God, and the Sun-God.

Human pictographic writing cannot take us back to the primitive period of religion, to the primitive concept of deity or deities. But the following facts point unmistakably to monotheism, and a Sky-God as the first deity, from whom descended the vast Sumerian pantheon, attaining in the end to about 5,000 gods.

And before we go into a serious anthropological and theological discussion you may wish to see how this ancient pictographic script was rapidly developed by the Sumerians, so that after 3,000 they were able to produce a great literature. Fig. 1 shows the famous Sumerian chronological record written by a scholar in 2100 B.C. I refer to this document of 400 lines, because it shows that the Sumerians at the end of their history believed in almost geological concepts for their early origins. He claims that the period before the Flood lasted

241,200 years, when there was already a polytheistic religion. He dates the Flood about 34,000 years B.C.

II

We have 575 tablets in most primitive pictographs, mostly from Erech. Here only two deities appear. Anu the Sky-God and Innini "the Queen of Heaven". Obviously written documents from any city will always reveal a preference for the gods of the local cult. Erech was the centre of the worship of the Sky-God and the Queen of Heaven, Innini, latterly called Ishtar and Ashtoreth by the Semites. It is, however, certain that when we press back towards the beginning of religion on written documents the pantheon of 3000 B.C. dwindles down to four and then only two deities. If there really was a larger pantheon at the dawn of history these numerous tablets which are all temple records would have mentioned them. The Sumerologist knows that this must be true from temple records of later periods where dozens of deities occur on this class of documents.

There is a gradual diminution of the pantheon back through the stages represented by four periods of early writing before 3000 B.C. until at Erech only two deities are found. The Sumerian theologians themselves had two views about the oldest deity from which the whole vast pantheon sprang. The philosophically minded, basing their theory on the well-known Sumerian principle that the whole universe and all things in it were derived from the *logos* or word of the Water-God, regard the Water-God as the first deity. Another school which probably preserves the true tradition and true fact, always regards the Sky-God as primitive and founder of the pantheon.

I should add at once that in these primitive records there is no trace of magic or demons. Everything points to a primitive personal god with the name *An* Heaven, Sky. That magic and so-called irrational or emotional elements did not exist then cannot be argued. Such evidence would not occur on temple records anyway.

I have not yet come to a discussion of the religions of far-flung Semitic races, who appear in history at much later periods, the Hebrews, Arabs, Phœnicians, Aramæans. Here again, nothing can be said about them until they began to produce written material. The Babylonians are of course far and away the oldest

Semitic race so far as written history can be placed in evidence. They arrived in Mesopotamia as early as 3000 B.C. But here they lost about all evidence of their original Semitic religion ; in fact they simply accepted the entire Sumerian religion, pantheon, theology, liturgies, magic, in fact they lost their racial religion in the same way as European races lost theirs when they accepted Christianity.

In bringing my own conclusions into relation with modern anthropology I must confess at once that an Assyriologist and Sumerologist can make no pretensions to speak as an Anthropologist. His life is spent in deciphering inscriptions of advanced cultures.

I can lay claim to special knowledge of the history of only two great religions, Sumerian and Semitic, and I wish to apply the results of an enquiry into the history of these groups to the problems which confront the science of comparative religions. It is difficult for a student, originally trained to study the history of a given religion under the influence of Darwinism and trained in the days when nature and star myths were regarded as the origin of all religions, to reconstruct his method of investigation. I extracted myself from the lure of the totemistic theories of Jevons and Robertson Smith by my own study of Semitic religions, without the assistance of the devastating criticism of Foucart, Zepletal, Nöldeke, Sir James Frazer and W. Schmidt. To explain the origin of deities over the wide field of Semitic religion, in Arabia, Canaan, Phœnicia, Syria and Babylonia, as due to animals worshipped as ancestors of the various Semitic tribes, is obviously false. I am not passing any comment on totemism as found in other areas, but the whole argument has been hopelessly ruined for Semitic religions, and with it any attempt to defend polytheism as the original religion of the Semites by starting with animal totems. The great champion of totemism and consequently polytheism as the basis of Semitic religions, Robertson Smith, seems to elaborate this theory in order to explain sacrifice, one of the principal religious acts of communion with the deity. It seems to be an argument which begs the principle. Assuming that Kemosh, god of the Moabites, Melkart, a god of the Phœnicians, Yav, god of the Hebrews, were originally only totem animals and ancestors of the various tribes, to eat of such a sacrificial animal easily explained sacrifice, and that theory of sacrifice has been almost universally accepted

by a school of Old Testament scholars. If that be so, then the Mosaic monotheism of the Hebrews is explained as an evolution from totemism.

III

The fundamental argument used by Robertson Smith and accepted by most of the Hebrew scholars after him was based upon linguistic evidence; most of Max Müller's nature myths as the origin of polytheism were based upon philological evidence. All our evidence for the history of Semitic religions must be linguistic and archæological. There are no longer any primitive Semitic tribes such as the anthropologists still have at their disposal in Australia, Africa and North America. But we possess immense written evidence for Arabia, Canaan, Phœnicia and Babylonia. Robertson Smith argued from the fact that in Arabic and Hebrew a large number of families, persons and cities are named after animals. For example, a town in north Israel was named *Layish*, lion, and a man has the same name, *Layish*. An Ammonite king has the name *Nabas*, serpent; a prince of Judah has the name *Nabas*, and a city in Judah is named *Nabas*. Now if animal names were given to tribes because these tribes descended from a totem animal, then animal names must be confined to the early stage of a religion. Several facts ruined this totemistic theory. When the earliest Arabic religion was discovered in the Yemen by the decipherment of Himyaritic inscriptions no animal names of cities or clans were found, and only three of men. Here there was an organized astral pantheon consisting of Moon, Sun and Venus. Arabian religion, therefore, in the first stage in which it can be studied belongs to the Polytheistic star myth, or nature myth type like most Indo-Germanic religions. We know them first in an advanced stage. It must be remembered by way of parenthesis that those scholars did not know the early South Arabic Himyaritic sources, and the vast field of Sumero-Babylonian religion was still closed to them.

Other facts destroyed the totem theory for Semitic religions even in the field which Robertson Smith and Jevons knew best, Hebrew, North Arabic, Phœnician and Aramaic.

Not one of the clans or families who bear animal names had a deity of its own. None of them were tribes, but only families in tribes; they are only clan names of ancestors who had animal names. For example *Hezir*, one of the families of the tribe of

Levi, means "swine", and there is a Hebrew named *Hezir*. The fact is that not one of the Semitic nations, tribes or cities which had a deity has an animal name. Moreover, the national or tribal deities of the far-flung Semitic races are now proved to be nature myths and every one of them star myths, except the national God of the Hebrews, Yav, Yahweh. Most of them are solar deities, a few in the Aramæan area are moon deities, and there is the corn deity Dagon; *dragon* in fact means "corn".

Another fact destroyed this theory. In the beginning of the history of Arabic religion animal names of men are rare, but the custom increases in the later stages until they become prolific in the age of Mohammed. That is also true of Babylonia. Animal names of men do occur in the earlier stages of Babylonian religion but rarely, and increase in number throughout the history of that culture. The Semitic religions of Babylonia appear first in an advanced stage of culture about 3000 B.C., and here the pantheon has been almost entirely borrowed from the Sumerians. Few traces of original Semitic religion can be traced in Babylonia, but such as are not wholly suppressed by the Sumerian pantheon prove that those Semites who intruded by conquest into the Sumerian kingdom before 3000 B.C. took with them the star myth pantheon of South Arabia.

No consecutive history of religion can compare in length of time, in richness of written sources, in evidence from all stages of its development, with the Sumero-Babylonian, not even the Indo-Germanic religions which have no written sources earlier than Hittite from the 15th century B.C. The Sanscrit sources may go back by tradition to 1500 B.C., but Sumerian can be traced in written record to 4000 B.C., and its continuous history traced to the Christian era.

It seems to be admitted that the nature myth gods of India, Greece and Italy and all Indo-Germanic religions started with a Sky-God, Zeus, Zeus-pater. Dyauspitar, Jupiter, "God the father", all derived from the root *div*, to "shine", whence the word *deus*, god. The history of the Sky-God has been elaborately studied by Leopold von Schroeder in his *Arische Religion* for Indo-Germanic in which he posits a monotheism based upon the Sky-God for all Indo-Germanic polytheism. Foucart, then, in a short article on *Sky and Sky-Gods* in Hastings' E.R.E. (six pages) on the basis of Egyptian and Indo-Germanic, came to this conclusion:—

"We may safely assume that the concept of Sky-God belongs

to the most ancient period in the history of religious feeling and that it is at least as ancient as primitive naturalism and animistic fetishism. Whether it is even pre-animistic in its fundamental aspect is a question which must be reserved."

Foucart is an Egyptologist who interests himself secondarily in anthropology and comparative religion, and an Assyriologist is bound to suffer from the same limitations. It is obvious that when he suggests the primitive monotheistic concept of a Sky-God as possibly *pre-animistic* he is using language which anthropologists like Marett would condemn.

IV

Animism or belief in souls, ghosts and ancestor worship connected with the great name of E. B. Tylor, is a perfectly comprehensible and clear definition of a stage of religion earlier than polytheistic nature gods. Tylor defined this stage of religion as "Belief in the existence of spiritual beings", and it is, I suppose, a stage which preceded all polytheistic religions. In this sense I can understand that the concept of primitive monotheistic and ethically pure Sky-God involves animism; in other words, is conceived of mentally as well as by volition as a creator spirit. But what Foucart means by defining this original monotheism of a Sky-God as pre-animistic I quite fail to understand. Marett writes on pre-animistic religion, "No anthropologist has ever supposed himself able fully and finally to explain the origin of belief in souls and spirits."

Andrew Lang and, more elaborately, W. Schmidt seem to have found races more primitive than animism and totemism in which there is a pure monotheism, a Supreme Being entirely free from magic and even without personality. This primitive monotheism widely distributed among races, still in existence and possible of being proved by Indo-Germanic and Sumerian philology, is elaborately defined by Schmidt in six huge volumes, *Der Ursprung der Gottesidee*. I do not pretend to have read all this, and I depend for an exposition of Schmidt's theory upon the English edition of his *resumé*, *Origin and Growth of Religion*. The various schools of thought, Max Müller's nature myths, Tylor's animism, Smith's totemism, Marett's magic, Lang's primitive monotheism, are all defined in this book. I know of only one criticism of Schmidt, that of the Regius Professor of Hebrew in Cambridge, who rejects Schmidt's arguments on the

ground that this primitive monotheism found in Africa and North America is too nebulous and that it has no continuity of evidence ; Marett has briefly noted Lang's theory of primitive monotheism or high gods with the remark, " I assume for working purposes that Mr. Lang's high gods must have had a psychological pre-history which would connect them with vaguer and even vaguer shapes," but " I have complete faith in Mr. Lang's high gods."

The Regius Professor also contends that Schmidt has paid no attention to higher culture religions, by which he means, of course, Indo-Germanic, Sumero-Babylonian and Egyptian. Unfortunately for his criticism, the specialists in Egyptian, Sumerian and Indo-Germanic have come to the conclusion that a Monotheism based on a Sky-God preceded polytheism. As to the history of the Sky-God in Semitic and Sumerian, Schmidt bewails the fact that there is no study of this subject, and I supplied it in my *Semitic Mythology*, 1931, the date of the appearance of Rose's English edition of *Origin and Growth of Religion*.

Volume 4 of Schmidt's great German work appeared in 1933 ; Volume 5 in 1934 ; Volume 6 in 1935 ; altogether over 3,000 octavo pages. In the last volume he analyses fifteen reviews, mostly favourable ; but of Cook's review, seventeen closely printed pages, no mention ; of Junker's history of Egyptian religion, 1931, in which the same thesis for Egypt is defended, not a syllable ; of my own book, 1931, parts of which were expressly written in response to his demand for an investigation of the Sky-God in Babylonia, no mention. Does Professor Schmidt confine himself entirely to the sphere of lower anthropology ?

Now Lang and Schmidt on the basis of lower cultures, and especially on the basis of the pygmies in Africa, the Indians of North America, define the original monotheism in these words. " The really monotheistic character of the Supreme Being is clear even to a cursory examination. This is true of the Supreme Being of most Pygmy tribes, of the Tierra del Fuegians, the primitive Bushmen, the Kurnai and Yuin of South-East Australia, the peoples of the Arctic culture, the primitives of North America. Among other races the fact of their original monotheistic belief has been obscured." This Supreme Being is defined in some areas as First Father, corresponding to Greek Zeus-pater, Latin Jupiter, and Schmidt might have added the widespread Semitic

custom of calling any deity "father, my father". There is everywhere in this great work evidence that the author cares nothing at all for the witness of the great culture religions even though he complains that specialists give him no material. He emphasizes the pure and moral character of this Supreme Being who in most areas is a Sky-God in the sense that he resides in the sky. For him this pure and highly moral original monotheism was degraded all over the world into polytheism. He uses the word "degradation", and Cook's criticism of this view is unanswerable. To compare the pygmy religion with its undoubted concept of a Supreme Being, with Greek, Sumerian and Egyptian religion on grounds of religious and cultural values is downright absurd. Polytheism may be a *degradation* of primitive monotheism in a scientific sense, but it is obviously untrue that monotheism of this primitive type is associated with a higher culture than the derived polytheism. The greatest culture ever produced in the ancient Semitic world arose under the most polytheistic religion ever known in Babylonia.

Now, as I have said, it is possible to trace Sumerian religion back through its long periods of intense Polytheism based on nature, star and theological myths to a period of pictographic writing; this vast polytheism of the Sumerians became the religion of Babylonia and Assyria; it was largely adopted in the Western and Northern Semitic lands. It was impregnated with magic which gave rise to the physical sciences of which they were the founders in the ancient world. They became under their system of theologically organized polytheism the founders of astronomy and mathematics of a high order. I came to the conclusion that the whole intricate polytheism of Sumer and Babylonia originated in a monotheistic concept for the following reasons. In the first place the Sumerian word for god, *digir*, means both "high" and "to be bright", and the sign used to write this word also means "sky". This is precisely parallel to the history of the Indo-Germanic word for the Sky-God from the root *div*, to be bright, *deus*. The pantheon in full bloom contained more than 5,000 deities great and small. The early history of this pantheon can be traced back through the inscriptions to the most primitive pictographs. A large body of early texts from about 3300 B.C. shows a pantheon of only 500 gods. In all theological treatises of the pantheon right back to 3300 the Babylonians and Sumerians always place the Sky-God

at the beginning and regard him as father of all the gods, whether personifications of nature, the stars and planets, or of abstract ideas, War, Industry, Justice, etc. The Sky-God has the name *An*, which is the ordinary word for sky, heaven. The early Sumerian texts and the conclusion deduced from them were published in 1928, or three years before Schmidt's *Origin and Growth of Religion* in which he clamoured for such evidence.

The evidence all points to the same conclusion as the Anthropologists Lang and Schmidt maintain; it agrees with Schroeder's great investigation of Indo-Germanic religions and of recent historians of Egyptian religion.

This Sky-God *An* or *Anu* of the Sumerians is known to have been personified and anthropomorphic, for there is a drawing of him on a seal where he is characterized as a rain god, and the texts relate the myth that in high heaven were kept the bread and water of eternal life.

V

As to the defence of this same thesis in the pure Semitic religions of Arabia, Canaan, Phœnicia and Syria. It is impossible to get behind the nature and star worship stage of Semitic polytheism here on the basis of the written sources; the word for god common to every Semitic language, *ilu*, *el*, *elab*, *eloah*, is of unknown origin and its root inexplicable. It is argued by Brockelmann that the development of the Islamic god *Allah* into a monotheistic god is really a revival of a prehistoric monotheistic Semitic deity. The fact is that in pre-Islamic polytheism the term "god" meant the Moon-God and in north Semitic or Phœnician and Canaanite "god" came to mean Sun-God. That is due to obvious facts. In Arabian Polytheism the *Moon-God* is the principal deity; in north Semitic the Sun-God overshadows all other deities. Consequently "god" in Arabian Polytheism took the place of the proper name of the Moon-God "Wadd", and in Canaan and Phœnicia "god" took the place of "Shemesh", the proper name of the Sun-God.

The literary remains of the oldest culture religions of Western Asia therefore substantially support the conclusions of Andrew Lang and Wilhelm Schmidt. The earliest conception of deity is really monotheistic; in the primitive races of the world to-day, this conception is vague, almost impersonal. Such a primitive stage is anterior to our Sumerian and Semitic sources.

When we first catch a glimpse of the religious mind of man at the dawn of history in Egypt and Babylonia, this primitive Supreme Being has become a very definite personal Sky-God, creator of the Universe and of Man. But one thing seems very clear to me. When man first found himself in the presence of the vast problems of life and death, of the forces of nature and the inexplicable universe, he placed his faith in the Supreme Spiritual Being. This for me was surely a rational process. It has no primary emotional basis, no mere irrational instinct, but the decision of a real *homo sapiens*. Religion was necessary to make anything rational out of the meaning of human existence, and without it there could be no cultural progress. We are dealing here with *man* and not with *monkeys*, with a mind and soul which, in my opinion, has no more to do with evolution from animal life than the progress of religion has to do with evolution.

These conclusions have a very vital importance in Christian Theology as well as in Anthropology. Atheism and Communism in our time are based very considerably on the conclusions of Anthropologists who posit an irrational and emotional origin for the religion of man. Applied to the origin of the great Mosaic ethical monotheism of the Old Testament and taught even in theological colleges, how could it have anything but a disastrous effect upon the power and enthusiasm of Christianity? Darwinian evolution applied to the origin and progress of religion can have only one result: it must destroy the faith of mankind that there is any reality in religion at all. That is the conclusion which a very large part of mankind has now drawn from this Anthropological movement, a conclusion for which even Christian theologians are not blameless. Do anthropologists and theologians really know the history of man down the ages from the dawn of culture? Does the atheism of modern times really understand that religion was the basis of all human culture, and that it began in the rational nature of man?

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NOTE.—It should be stated that when I wrote my *Semitic Mythology*, in which the conclusions stated in this paper were first published, I was unaware of W. Schmidt's similar conclusions on other grounds, nor had I yet seen Leopold von Schroeder's *Arische Religion*.

S.L.

Fig. 1.



Four-sided prism. Sumerian dynastic list giving the capitals and kings before and after the Flood down to 2100 B.C.
—Ashmolean Museum. The Weld-Blundell Prism.

Published in *Oxford Edition of Cuneiform Texts*, Vol. II.

Fig. 2.



Specimen of earliest period of Sumerian pictographic writing. Found at Kish.
This tablet does not contain the name of a deity, but others of the same period from Erech contain the names of two deities, the Sky-god and the Queen of Heaven.