

Israel's Despiritualizing Philosophy

Description

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In [the previous post](#), we went through a number of ancient Israelite texts that present a materialistic view of human nature. Unlike the popular idea that humans have a dual nature (physical and non-physical), these texts portray humans as made of only one substance – dirt. Humans, like the other animals, were formed from dirt, and when we die we return to dirt just like they do.

What we're talking about in this post is the fact that this materialist anthropology espoused among ancient Israelites was part of a broader conceptual move on their part to despiritualize everything. It was ubiquitous in the ancient world to believe that spiritual essences pervaded nature. Ancient paganism was essentially animistic, so they believed the sea wasn't just water; it was infused with an intelligent, spiritual essence and was thus thought of as a deity. This was true of everything from the sky to the land, to particular trees to the sun, moon, and stars, to the very air we breathe. And of course, they believed humans also had a spiritual essence that might continue on in some sense after the body dies. This is why ancient Greek myths, for example, include journeys to the underworld, where the spirits of the dead persist.

The radical move made in ancient Israel isn't what most people think. Usually, people think it was a rejection of polytheism and an embrace of monotheism – basically, replacing a whole host of spiritual entities with one spiritual entity. But this actually isn't what the Israelites did. (And actually, ancient Israelites weren't monotheistic, but that's another story for another time.) The point right now is that the truly radical aspect of Israelite philosophy had nothing to do with the *number* of things; it had to do with the *nature* of things. Their philosophy despiritualized the world.

The ancient Israelites who made this move looked at the sea and said, "Yeah, that's just water." They said the sun is just a light, as are the moon and stars. The sky, to them, was just a beaten sheet. The air, just air. The land, just rock and clay. Idols were just wood, stone, and metal. And humans were mammals among mammals, formations of dirt capable of breathing, walking, thinking, and talking.

Going through every instance of Israelite despiritualization would be a massive project, but here I'll mention a couple examples.

First, the major parts of the world as experienced by all people – land and sky. In ancient Egypt, the sky was regarded as a goddess named Nut, the earth was a god named Geb, and the air between them was another god named Shu (see image above; Nut is the arched female on top, Geb is the reclining male on the bottom, and Shu is kneeling in the middle).

A text known as Coffin Text Spell 78 describes them like this: (the “ba,” or “soul,” of Shu is speaking)

I am the ba of Shu,
to whom was given Nut atop him and Geb under his feet.
I am between them.

– CT II 19a-b (translation by James P. Allen in *Context of Scripture*, Volume 1, p. 11)

So again, the idea is that you have three deities here. At the top is Nut, in the middle is Shu, and at the very bottom is Geb (see the hieroglyph in the image above). Nut is the sky, Geb is the land, and Shu is the air between them.

From another Coffin Text (Spell 80) we read that Nut and Geb were married and that another deity at some point parted them. Here’s what it says:

Then said Atum

...

Before I had made Nut so she could be over my head and Geb could marry her...

...

When he parted Geb from Nut

– CT II 32b-35h (translation by James P. Allen in *Context of Scripture*, Volume 1, p. 12)

Other texts say Nut and Geb had children, who were also spiritualized aspects of nature. In other words, they were simultaneously parts of nature and spiritual deities. As an example, here’s a text that describes the sun god Re as a son of Nut, being reborn each day:

For you indeed are Re,
Come forth from Nut, who bears the Sun each day,
Reborn like Re each day!

– Pyramid Text 606 (from *Hymns, Prayers and Songs: An Anthology of Ancient Egyptian Lyric Poetry*, p. 33)

If you’re familiar with Greek Mythology, this might be reminding you of their most famous creation myth, Hesiod’s [*Theogony*](#). Only there, the sky is a male deity while the earth is a goddess. Still, they produce other deities and are eventually separated making room for the world as we know it, or at least as the ancient Greeks knew it. Obviously, these accounts (the Greek and Egyptian) are very similar. And they aren’t the only accounts like this. This is just the sort of thing you find in ancient pagan literature. The different aspects of nature are viewed as the embodiments of various spiritual entities.

Okay, now here’s the main point: you don’t find this in Israelite literature. In fact, texts where you might expect to find these sorts of descriptions, what you find instead are radically despiritualized accounts. For example, take Genesis 1. You still have the separation of the sky and land, but here they are literally just the sky and land, not deities! You have the sea, the sun, the moon, the stars, etc. all of which were regarded as deities by other cultures, but in Genesis, they are despiritualized and understood as purely material objects. I’ll just quote some selections to give you the idea. This is from my own translation and some of the terms are different from what you’re

likely used to. Most notably, instead of translating the word “elohim” as “God,” I translate it as “deities.” And, in case you’re unaware, everyone admits the word is plural – people just have their reasons for translating it as singular “God,” but I don’t think those reasons are convincing, and I think there are very good reasons for translating it as “deities.” But we don’t have time to get into that in this post. Okay, so let’s read the text, and pay particular attention to the fact that the elements of nature, like the sky, land, and seas, are not described as deities. And the deities are never described as spiritual essences pervading nature. Okay, here we go, and remember, I’m just quoting selections:

In the beginning of deities hewing the skies and the land –
when the land had done did her thing helter and skelter,
and darkness was upon the face of the deep

...

And *the* deities said,
“Let a beaten sheet do his thing in the midst of the waters”

...

And *the* deities worked the beaten sheet

...

And *the* deities called the beaten sheet “skies,”

...

And *the* deities said,
“Let the waters from beneath the skies be collected to one place
and let the dry ground be seen.”

And it was so.

And *the* deities called the dry ground “land”

And called the reservoir of the waters “seas.”

And *the* deities saw that it was good.

– selections from Genesis 1:1-10 (*Not A Bible Translation*)

Alright, I hope you can see how different that is from Egyptian and Greek accounts. This despiritualization really set Israelites apart. Imagine an ancient Jew who held to this despiritualized philosophy talking to an ancient pagan about pretty much anything. If they talk about the sky, the pagan sees it as not just the sky, but also as a deity, while the Jew sees it as just being the sky. And it’s the same deal if they were to talk about the sun, the sea, the land, the air, and the list goes on and on. While pagans thought there were deities in *every* natural body, Jews thought there were deities in *none* of those natural bodies. This is probably why Jews and (later) Christians were regarded by some pagans as atheists (see Josephus, *Against Apion*, Book 2, 148 and *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, 3:2, 9:2).

I had hoped to write a few paragraphs about idolatry, but unfortunately, I don’t have time. But I recommend looking up something called “the opening of the mouth” ceremony, or the “mouth washing” ceremony (or just anything that explains ancient idolatry) and comparing that to texts like Psalm 115 and Isaiah 44:9-20. What you’ll find is that ancient pagans performed rituals that they believed caused a spirit of a deity to inhabit an idol. The materialistic school in ancient Israel rejected this idea of spiritualistic indwelling and instead regarded idols as being nothing more than the materials they were made from. This brings us full circle to ancient Israelite anthropology. Remember, the Israelite texts we read in our last episode said we humans are also nothing more

than the materials we are made from; namely, dirt. From this episode, I hope you can now see that this materialistic anthropology is just one part of a much broader project in ancient Israel promoting a materialistic worldview wherein all things are despiritualized and regarded as being purely material.

Also, in case you didn't see [the previous post](#), we have a series of meetings coming up that we'd love for you to attend!

UPDATE: The above-mentioned meetings are now finished. You can learn all about them and watch the recordings [HERE](#).

Here is a series of videos that goes into much more depth explaining ancient Israelite materialism:

For another podcast episode that explains how you can know materialism is true, give this a listen: