

1. Early Cosmology and Religion

William Haines, June 5, 2026

When the Book of Genesis turns from the order of the physical cosmos to the order of humanity, it focuses first on laying out basic family roles and relations. Woman is made to be man's helpmeet. She is made from a man; "therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh." He is to rule over her. She must have pain in childbirth. A man should be in some sense his brother's keeper.¹ The remainder of Genesis is the story of patrilineal descent groups, laden with genealogical detail and stories of immediate family relations, grounding and classifying the whole human world as the very extended family or lineage of those who tell and hear the story. They are the descendants of Adam and Eve and Noah, and more specifically of Shem, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, with one tribe descended from each of Jacob's sons.

All humans are kin. But the covenant with Abraham narrated in Genesis 17 makes God the special protector of the particular lineage of the narrative's audience, in exchange for a permanent practice of genital alteration that might suggest an acknowledgment of God's permanent patriarchal headship. Once that covenant is sealed, God miraculously has the aged Sarah bear a first son to Abraham so that Abraham can be "the father of many nations." God seems to drive home the point about his own patriarchal headship when he tests whether Abraham will offer up his only son in sacrifice.²

In the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures, this personal God often appears as his people's *father*. God refers to his people collectively as "My child, my firstborn Israel."³ Those traveling with Moses are told, "You are children of the Lord your

¹ Genesis 2:18-24, 3:16, 4:9f. Translations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

² Genesis 22.

³ Exodus 4:22.

God.”⁴ God says, “[David] shall cry to me, ‘You are my Father, my God, and the Rock of my salvation!’”⁵ It is sung of God, “As a father has compassion for his children, so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him.”⁶ Isaiah says to God, “For you are our father, though Abraham does not know us and Israel does not acknowledge us; you, O Lord, are our father; our Redeemer from of old is your name,”⁷ and “Yet, O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.”⁸ Malachi says to the people, “Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our ancestors?”⁹ Hosea speaks for God: “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son ... It was I who taught Ephraim to walk, taking them by the arms ... To them I was like one who lifts a little child to the cheek, and I bent down to feed them.”¹⁰

But sometimes a different family relation comes to the fore. A number of the biblical prophets portray Israel vividly as God’s bride.¹¹ Julia O’Brien’s study *Challenging Prophetic Metaphor: Theology and Ideology in the Prophets* chooses five main metaphors to address, and four of the five are family positions. The five are God as husband, God as father, God as warrior, Jerusalem as daughter, and Edom as brother.¹²

Even today many or most Westerners call God “Father,” and the metaphor is not a dead one. Freud may not have been far wrong about his own milieu when he wrote in *Totem and Taboo*,

⁴ Deuteronomy 14:1.

⁵ Psalms 89:26.

⁶ Psalms 103:13.

⁷ Isaiah 63:16.

⁸ Isaiah 64:8.

⁹ Malachi 2:10.

¹⁰ Hosea 11:1-4.

¹¹ Jeremiah 3, Hosea 2, Isaiah 54, and Ezekiel 16 and 23.

¹² O’Brien 2008.

The psychoanalysis of individual human beings ... teaches us with quite special insistence that the god of each of them is formed in the likeness of his father, that his personal relation to God depends on his relation to his father in the flesh and oscillates and changes along with that relation, and that at bottom God is nothing but an exalted father.¹³

Especially during one's early childhood, when parents loom largest, they are likely to seem all-powerful, all-knowing, and the definitive source of norms. (At least this is so where parents are the main agents of early childrearing.) Parents are the providers, models, and enforcers; they are love, comfort, recourse, safety and fear. These are ways in which a young child's parents resemble the Abrahamic God as traditionally conceived in the abstract; or rather it is God who resembles parents. In Jeannette Haien's novel *The All of It*, a woman in Ireland speaks to her priest about a locked room in her childhood home:

I can't say I didn't wonder about the room, but only to myself. I didn't, I mean, ever talk to Kevin about it. That I didn't had to do with the fear of our dad, like as if he'd *know* if myself and Kevin were to talk of it and get himself into a rage and take it out on us. Do you follow me, Father?¹⁴

Further, the conceptual incongruity between (a) the godlike parents imprinted on our psyches in our earliest years, and (b) the very human parents we later gradually come to know, may be echoed by the incongruity between (a) the philosophical concept of God and (b) any working sense of a God with whom an adult could have an active spiritual relationship in a world thoroughly inconsistent with perfect providence. Conceiving God as somehow more than one person might help someone negotiate the tensions or compartmentalize the inconsistencies.

¹³ Freud 1990, p. 147.

¹⁴ Haien 1988, p. 37

Outside Palestine, in tribe after tribe across the ancient West, we find the religious and cosmological imagination focused on an extended family of gods, whose eldest generation was the generation of the world. Typically this extended family functioned as a conception of the overall order among the main phenomena of the natural world, human life, and cultural geography. The family's members represented earth, sky, sea, and underworld; sun and moon; home, marriage, love, and war; agriculture, hunting, communication and craft; Athens and Ephesos. The cycles of nature and the vicissitudes of war were narrated in terms of these gods' family and other personal concerns. Winter, for example, is the grief of the grain mother over her daughter's periodic departure to live with her husband in his kingdom of death.¹⁵

Regarding Mediterranean polytheism in general, Jan Assmann draws an interesting distinction. It is one thing to envision the cosmos as in some sense a family; it is another thing to envision the cosmos as in some sense *our* family.

The gods live, act, and display their personalities and characters in interaction, not only or even primarily with humans, but with one another, in relation to other gods, in "constellations" that find their expression in myths, genealogies, epithets, names—in short, in everything that can be said about a deity. Divine constellations reflect the fundamental order and elementary structure of human society—husband and wife, brother and sister, mother and son, mother and daughter, father and son, father and daughter, lover and beloved, lord and slave, hero and enemy, and so on. These constellations unfold in stories (myths) of equally fundamental character, founding and modeling the basic structures of human life, institutions, hopes, and experience: love and death, war and peace, identity and transformation, suffering and salvation. The relation

¹⁵ One historian emphatically opines: "Homer *believed in* Zeus and Athena and the rest ... Hesiod surely *believed in* the Olympian gods, and not self-consciously" (Brinton 1959, pp. 62, 66).

between the divine and the human world is anthropomorphic rather than anthropocentric.¹⁶

And yet there is a sense in which those planets revolved around us. A standard Greek epithet for Zeus was “father of gods and men,” and the Roman name “Jupiter” derives from the phrase of address “God, Father.”¹⁷ The Greeks sang of literal kinship relations between humans and gods, often in connection with the ancestors of their cities. The Roman poet Virgil was writing in the Homeric tradition when he told how Aeneas, son of Venus and therefore a *hero*, was helped by his mother on his way to laying the groundwork for Rome.¹⁸ Even Cicero took such ideas seriously:

Hence this whole universe must be thought of as a single community shared by gods and men. Now in communities there is a system (which I shall describe at the appropriate point) whereby differences of status within families are determined by blood relationships. In the context of the cosmos the same applies on a much vaster and more splendid scale, establishing ties of blood between men and gods.¹⁹

Earlier Roman religion was still more anthropocentric. In an extensive study of how the Roman concept of *pietas* influenced ancient Roman and modern Western law, Janez Kranjc writes,

The origins of the word *pietas* stem from the times when the agnate Roman family was trying to shape its life in harmony with the spirits of their dead ancestors, the *di parentes*. Initially *pietas* represented

¹⁶ Assmann 2007, p. 20.

¹⁷ de Vaan 2008, p. 316.

¹⁸ Romulus and Remus were descendants of Aeneas and therefore of Venus (on their mother’s side); but their father was Mars.

¹⁹ These lines are spoken by Cicero as a character in his own dialogue *The Laws*. Cicero 2009, p. 105.

the state of a person scrupulously fulfilling all the duties required by the *di parentes* of his or her tribe. There were two groups of these duties: those related to the cult of the *di parentes*, i.e. of the divine members of the tribe, and the reverence and consideration towards the living members of the family.²⁰

(Duty to family and country remained the primary focus of the Latin word *pietas*, especially in law; while the scope of the word was extended in Cicero's time to include dutifulness toward gods in addition, and hence toward the Abrahamic god when he came to be worshiped in Latin.)

A Greek tale of the establishment of cosmic order displays an interesting story-pattern of conflict among father, wife/mother, and son. Ouranos (the sky) sired the Titans by Gaia (the earth), but he would not make way for these offspring to leave her womb. Gaia directed one of her sons, Kronos, to hide in the entryway with a "sharp-toothed" stone harvesting tool she gave him, and from there to castrate his father—which Kronos did. Ouranos fled, and far away the sky remains. Thus Ouranos' sons and daughters escaped from confinement inside their mother, and the conquering son Kronos became lord of the cosmos.²¹ In rough analogy with his father's actions, Kronos then insisted on swallowing his own children by his sister-wife Rhea at almost the moment she bore them, until Gaia helped Rhea by hiding one child and tricking Kronos by giving him a clothed stone to swallow in the child's place. The hidden child, the god Zeus, grew and overpowered his father in turn, forcing Kronos to vomit up his other five children. Under Zeus' leadership the six siblings, three female (hearth, marriage, and farming) and three male (sky, sea, and underworld), then warred against the Titans and won, becoming the lead Olympians, having many offspring of their own.²² Zeus has so far managed to defeat further rebellions. The securing of cosmic order is thus envisioned as the securing of kingly paternal

²⁰ Kranjc 2012, p. 14

²¹ Hesiod, *Theogony*, lines 154-210.

²² Hesiod, *Theogony*, lines 453-506.

authority, while the potential for upset (succession) is felt as inherent in the family model.

Human heads of clans and households are inevitably succeeded by their juniors; but divine patriarchs can be permanent. In the Book of Genesis we see conflicts between God and his progeny, with motifs recalling the Greek pattern;²³ but here the rebel is usually man, and God is always the winner. When Adam, incited by Eve, bids to become like God, biting the fruit from God's tree and hiding, the couple's consequent exit from the garden is their defeat, not their victory. Soon the sons of God breed with the daughters of men, making giants or heroes; but God drowns these in the Flood.²⁴ Then people build a tower to reach heaven; but God remarks the threat and scatters them.²⁵ John Milton gave a classical flavor to an analogous story, in *Paradise Lost*.²⁶ William Blake could take the parallel with the Titans as understood:

And when the stars threw down their spears
And watered heaven with their tears
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the lamb make thee?²⁷

Around the ancient Mediterranean and the Fertile Crescent there was a practice of formally identifying gods of one community with gods of another: identifying El with Kronos, Juno with Hera, and so on, especially in service of the mutual acceptability of oaths that would secure long-distance trade

²³ Indeed we find stories very similar to the Greek ones in ancient Lebanon, Syria, and Assyria, and including conflicts between El and Baal (Graf 2007b, pp. 47-49; Collins 2007, p. 60f).

²⁴ Genesis 6:1-8.

²⁵ Genesis 11:4-8.

²⁶ The title character of a recent television series is Lucifer, awol from Hell and solving murder cases as a consulting detective in Los Angeles. He refers to God as "Dad," and much of the drama revolves around his family issues with Dad, Mom (Mother Nature), and a male character who is Lucifer's "brother" because both are angels.

²⁷ From William Blake, "The Tyger."

agreements. A number of early lists of such equations survive.²⁸ Perhaps the choices of whom to identify with whom can help us see what the ancients regarded as important or identifying about their gods. Over time the general positions of father and mother became ever more prominent as leading divine attributes.

Hence, when a goddess rose from the sea in response to a prayer in Apuleius' second-century novel *The Golden Ass*, she could speak as follows:

Lo, I come to your aid, Lucius, moved by your pleas—I, the mother of the universe, queen of all the elements, the original offspring of eternity, loftiest of the gods, queen of the shades, foremost of the heavenly beings, single form of gods and goddesses alike. I control by my will the dazzling summits of the sky, the wholesome breezes of the sea, the despairing silences of the dead below.

The whole world worships my power under an abundance of images, a variety of rituals, and an array of names. Thus the Phrygians, the first race to arise, call me the Pessinuntian mother of the gods; the Athenians, sprung primordially from their own soil, name me Cecropian Minerva; the Cyprians on their wave-lapped island, Venus of Paphos; the Cretans with their bows and arrows, Dictynian Diana; the trilingual Sicilians, Proserpina of Ortygia. For the ancient Eleusinians, I am Actaeon Ceres; for others, Juno, Bellona, Hecate, or Rhamnusia. But the Ethiopians, whose sky is lit by the raw rays of the Sun at his daily birth, and the Africans, and the Egyptians with their powerful, immemorial knowledge, call me by my true name, Queen Isis.²⁹

For the Egyptians, Isis was prominent in her role as a mother: the mother of Horus, the mother of any current Pharaoh, and the mother of the dead in general (though in the Greco-Roman world she was more popular in her role as faithful

²⁸ Graf 2007, p. 9f; Assmann 2007, pp. 24ff.

²⁹ Apuleius 2012, p. 250f.

wife).³⁰ But the Phrygians are first on her list here for good reason. The Phrygian state goddess Cybele, a mother goddess who was also understood to be married to her ecstatically self-castrating priests, was popular in the wider Greek world by the fifth century BC, and was variously identified with Gaia, Rhea, and several Olympians. She was sufficiently important in the third century BC that the Roman senate sought her help against Carthage, importing her from Phrygia in the form of a black meteorite and incorporating her into the state religion. She gave Rome the victory. Rome gave her a major week-long festival every April, the Megalesia (from the Greek for “great”). In the Roman world she was known as the Great Mother (*Magna Mater*), an abstract name suiting the already highly syncretic character of her worship. Although the Great Mother was always regarded as having a somewhat un-Roman flavor,³¹ she remained popular in Rome and its Empire at least up to the time, half a millennium later, when Constantine gave Imperial approval to Christianity and Mary became the popular sacred mother.

At the origin of the Empire, when Augustus Caesar (who claimed descent from Venus) set himself up as a god-emperor, he did so not as “One Man” but as the head of a family. By various means he established his family as a real and symbolic embodiment of the state. He declared himself the Father of the Fatherland (*pater patriae*), a title until then given not to rulers but to outstanding citizens who had been of exceptional service to the state. He filled high offices with his close relatives and family slaves. And he instituted a program of public iconography featuring his family tableau and portraying his wife Livia with the identifying paraphernalia of the Great Mother and associated goddesses.³² For an account of how Augustus shaped a new political system around family images and practices, see Beth Severy’s 2003 monograph *Augustus and the Family at the Birth of the Roman Empire*.

³⁰ Heyob 1975, p. 44

³¹ Beard 1994, *passim*.

³² Severy 2003, *passim*.

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