

YOU ARE MY SON: GOD AS FATHER IN PSALMS AND ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN ICONOGRAPHY

Tu és meu Filho: Deus como Pai nos Salmos e na Iconografia do Antigo Oriente Próximo

*Guilherme Brasil de Souza¹
Martin G. Klingbeil²*

ABSTRACT

Since the dawn of the Enlightenment, western society has sought to emancipate itself from any connections to a notion of the divine. The Judeo-Christian God has been relegated as a figure of the past and characterized as a later development from the polytheistic religions of the Ancient Near East into a monotheism that would eventually evolve into the secular atheistic society we have today. This caricatured view of God has been predominant in our western society and has been deeply caricatured by scholars in the humanities and the sciences. Due to these assumptions, this paper seeks to reassess these claims in light of their historical factuality. The methodology we have employed in our work is a comparative study between the portrayals of the monotheistic father God in the Psalms by the Hebrew authors and that of the polytheistic father gods seen throughout the Ancient Near East. We have restricted our study to the Psalms since it is here where we have a large variety of father imagery in the metaphors employed by the Psalmists. By investigating carefully these passages in the Psalms and comparing them with their Ancient Near Eastern counterparts we will see that the depictions of God are very different from the anthropomorphic notions ascribed to Him by the Ancient Near Eastern cultures.

KEYWORDS: OLD TESTAMENT; FATHERHOOD LANGUAGE; WESTERN SOCIETY; BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

RESUMO

Desde o alvorecer do Iluminismo, a sociedade ocidental tem procurado se emancipar de qualquer conexão com uma noção do divino. O Deus judaico-cristão tem sido relegado a uma figura do passado, e caracterizado como um desenvolvimento

¹ Undergraduate Theology Student at Southern Adventist University, Collegedale, Tennessee, USA.

² Professor of Biblical Studies and Archaeology; Associate Director of the Institute of Archaeology at Southern Adventist University, Collegedale, Tennessee, USA

posterior das religiões politeístas do Antigo Oriente Próximo em um monoteísmo que pudesse eventualmente evoluir para a sociedade ateuista secular que temos hoje. Essa visão caricatural de Deus tem sido predominante em nossa sociedade ocidental e profundamente parodiada por estudiosos das humanidades e das ciências. Este artigo visa, portanto, reavaliar essas afirmações à luz de sua factualidade histórica. A metodologia que empregamos em nosso trabalho é um estudo comparativo entre a imagem do Deus-pai nos Salmos, construída pelos autores hebreus, e os deuses-pai no Antigo Oriente Próximo. Restringimos nosso estudo aos Salmos, pois é aqui onde temos uma grande variedade de imagens de pai nas metáforas empregadas pelos salmistas. Ao investigar cuidadosamente essas passagens nos Salmos e compará-las com suas contrapartes do Antigo Oriente Próximo, veremos que as representações de Deus são muito diferentes das noções antropomórficas atribuídas a ele pelas culturas do Antigo Oriente Próximo.

PALAVRA-CHAVE: ANTIGO TESTAMENTO; LINGUAGEM PATERNALISTA; SOCIEDADE OCIDENTAL; INTERPRETAÇÃO BÍBLICA

INTRODUCTION

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Throughout history humanity has tried to grasp and apprehend the abstractions of reality through means of prior known realities. As a result, concrete symbols and signs, as well, as metaphors have been devised in order to achieve this purpose. However, just as man has used metaphors and other linguistic devices to represent unknown abstract realities, God has used images to reveal His mysterious divine attributes to humanity. This revelation of the reality of a transcendent God can be clearly seen in the Bible and especially in the Psalms. The Psalms are replete with images depicting God dealing with the created universe and with humankind in particular.

Thus, this study will focus primarily on the image of God as father. The Psalms contain three out of the eighteen explicit references to God as father.³ This image has stirred controversy throughout Christian history. On the one hand, the image of God as father has been used to justify the social oppression and subjugation of women particularly in nineteenth century America and in present day developing countries, or as Samuel Terrien points out, “biblical faith has been attacked on the ground that the notion of divine fatherhood is inevitably associated with a patriarchal system of society that oppresses womanhood”.⁴ On

³ DAVIDSON, p. 118.

⁴ TERRIEN, p. 67.

the other hand, the image of God as father has been severely misrepresented by feminist Biblical hermeneutics leading to the deconstruction of the father figure in our contemporary post-modern society. However, the Hebrew Psalter presents a different route from these two extreme pathways.

It is on this note that this study aims to retrieve the true meaning of the image of God as father, as seen in Psalms. Since “Ancient Near Eastern iconography as a growing field in Biblical studies provides a tool through which the thought-world of the Biblical authors may be accessed through a visual artifact that can be related to the text”⁵ this study aims at doing a contextual study of the images of the monotheistic Hebrew father God with the images of the polytheistic gods and goddesses of the ANE through an iconographic survey of the literary and visual images of God as father in the ANE and in the Hebrew Bible.

This work will start off with an overview of the concept of fatherhood in the theocentric Israelite and geocentric ANE societies in order to see how fatherhood reflected in divine language. Once we have laid down this notion, we will turn to an analysis of the literary images of God as father in Psalms 2; 68:5-7; 89:27; 103:11-14. Then, after describing the concepts of fatherhood in the metaphors and sub metaphors of these particular Psalms, we will look at the images of God as father in the ANE. Once we have briefly analyzed these ANE images, we will compare and contrast these image to those of the distinctive Judean God in order to understand the imagery of God as father in the Hebrew Bible.

In sum, this study seeks to extract the true biblical meaning of the fatherhood of God as opposed to sexist or feminist ideologies. The image of God as father ultimately represents compassion, or as David Tasker says, “the basic underlying rationale of God’s fatherhood is his passion for his children. The intimate concern and tireless energy he expends in his fathering role is in marked contrast to the largely self-serving detachment of the ANE father-gods, and provide a basis for his role model for human fatherhood.”⁶

⁵ KLINGBEIL, 2007, p. 59.

⁶ TASKER, 2002, p. 305

FATHERHOOD IN ISRAEL AND THE ANE

This comparative study will be done in line with Klingbeil's distinction between a theocentric Israelite worldview and a geocentric ANE one.⁷ Keel highlights the theocentric view of the Psalms quiet well saying, "body-soul dualism is unknown in biblical anthropology. Man has no existence without his body; man has no inner nature that is not expresse."⁸ One must have such a socio-religious framework in mind in order to better understand the metaphors of God as conveyed in the Psalms. In addition to this, such a world view must be compared and contrasted with that of the geocentric ANE in order to avoid misconceptions between Israelite and ANE ritual practices.

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Due to this distinction, this first section will survey the socio-religious context forming these world views in both Israel and the ANE in order to reconstruct father roles in both of these distinct, yet to some extent similar, social contexts. In order to achieve this aim, it is necessary to understand the social, religious, and political roles fathers played in order to comprehend the usage of father imagery by the Hebrew Psalter as well as by the images from the ANE.

Contrary to contemporary post-modern nuclear family systems, both Israelite and ANE families were structured in extended families according to the patriarchal system. Archaeological excavations at *Tell en-Nasbeh* have shed light on family life in the Iron Age II. Aaron Brody has said that there was uncovered a "particular five building compound as the home of three nuclear families whose houses were physically linked. Shared or pooled resources of these nuclear families, revealed through household archaeology, suggest that this compound housed an extended family."⁹ Adding to Brody's thought, Jorge Maldonado comments on Israelite family systems saying, "The family in the Old Testament was definitely patriarchal. One of the terms that denote it was the paternal house בֵּית־אָבִי. The

7 KLINGBEIL, 2012.

8 KEEL, 1997, p. 308

9 BRODY, 2011, p. 246

genealogies were always depicted through the paternal line. The father had supreme authority over his sons, even the married ones, as long as they were living with him, and over their women, being able even to decide whether they should live or die. Disobedience and curse against ones parents were punished by death (Ex. 21:15; Lev 20:9; Prv 20:20).¹⁰

Narrowing down the focus to the father's house, King and Stager, say that the father's house was the "major focus of the religious, social, and economic spheres of Israelite life and was at the center of Israel's history, faith, and traditions."¹¹ This is clearly in line with Maldonado's portrayal of father roles in ancient Israel: that is, his social, religious, and economic (unity) dominance over the family. Socially, the dominant-father archetype would outlast the Iron Age even though modified by the creation of later social institutions such as the monarchy and the temple. With the development of the tribes of Israel, the several *bet ab* formed larger structures known as *mispahah* or families that were united by their common ancestral link to one of the twelve sons of Jacob. However, as in the case of early patriarchal history, the father figure still retained dominance over any family decisions. With the advent of the monarchy, judicial decisions once solved within the confines of the family were delegated to the state. However, a father's complaint would always be met by the court.¹²

In addition to social supremacy, the patriarchal Israelite and ANE fathers also performed religious duties. In the theocentric society of ancient Israel, religion and society were tightly woven together. The father fulfilled the priestly roles within his family. He mediated the relations between his family and YHWH in the case of Israel or the ancestor cult in the case of Ugarit. In Israel, this is most clearly seen in the ritual of the Passover "where family members gathered in the sanctuary home."¹³ Similarly,



Figure 1 Akenhaten praying to Aton

¹⁰ MALDONADO, 2003, p. 14.

¹¹ STAGER; KING, p. 39.

¹² MALDONADO, p. 14.

¹³ Idem, p. 15.

fathers in Ugarit and Emar were also responsible for religious functions in their household. However, contrary to Israelite fathers, Ugaritic fathers were responsible for maintaining the ancestor cult which was a strictly forbidden practice in the Pentateuch.¹⁴

Aside from religious duties, fathers also maintained the structural unity of the clan. Similarly to Israelite fathers, fathers in Egypt also took part in the spiritual life of their family members. The wall relief from Amarna in Fig 1 depicts Akhenaten interceding on behalf of his family to the sun god on behalf of his family and his nation. However, on the other hand, contrary to Israelite fathers who served on behalf of the monotheistic YHWH, Egyptian society was regulated by the Pharaoh who served both as father and god. In Egypt, the image and icon of divine fatherhood were intermixed in Pharaoh who “had been begotten by Amon-Re upon the queen mother.”¹⁵ Therefore, being “Horus the favorite son of Ra”¹⁶, pharaoh was responsible for caring for his nation as a divine father.

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In sum, father roles in Israel, Syria, and Egypt were based on social authority, religious duties in the family cult, and the unity of family members under one patriarchal banner. However, how these roles were expressed depended on each nation’s world view. Commenting on the distinctiveness between Israel and the ANE, John Walton rightly says, “In Israel people also believed that they had been created to serve God. The difference was that they saw humanity as having been given a priestly role in sacred space rather than as slave labor to meet the needs of the deity.”¹⁷ Such conception could easily be applied to the roles fathers played in both Israelite and ANE society.

14 SCHLOEN, p. 343. See also Deuteronomy 18: 20

15 FRANKFORT, 1962, p. 299.

16 BRIER; HOBBS, 2008, p. 68.

17 WALTON, 2006, p. 215.

IMAGES OF FATHERHOOD IN THE PSALMS

Having analyzed the image of father in ANE society, we can agree with Allister Mcgrath when he says, “One of the interesting aspects of the analogical nature of theological language is the way in which persons or social roles in the Ancient Near East were seen to be suitable models for the divine activity or personality.”¹⁸ Having already seen this above, we now turn to the usage of the metaphor of God as father in the Psalms. As Klingbeil has rightly stated, “The point of departure for the comparative process within the context of OT studies must be the Biblical text.”¹⁹ Due to this, we will begin by analyzing the anthropomorphic metaphor of God as father which appears only three times directly in the Psalms and then comparing it with its ANE counterpart. This metaphor comprises only 0.6% of metaphors in the Psalms and is part of the interactive metaphors that constitute 79% of the Hebrew Psalter.²⁰ Despite the scarcity of its usage in the Psalms, it is crucial for a theocentric understanding of God as opposed to the contemporary geocentric use made by feminist, secular, and postmodern interpretations. A study of the images of god in the Psalms will show that God’s fatherhood is tied to the roles of creator, defender, and instructor.

Psalm 2 gives an interesting image of God as father. Though the text does not explicitly mention the word father, the image is clearly one of divine father. God takes care of His son and protects him against his enemies. In 2:7, God says, “I will declare the decree: the LORD hath said unto me, Thou *art* my Son; this day have I begotten thee.” The image is not dealing with physical procreation since no mention of a mother goddess is made; rather it is talking about fatherhood. This fatherhood is expressed in verses 8-12 in which the Psalmist receives the nations and kingdoms from God and in which God gives

¹⁸ MCGRATH, 1999, p. 159.

¹⁹ KLINGBEIL, 2007, p. 61.

²⁰ KLINGBEIL, 1999, p. 34-3.

instruction to the kings of the earth to fear Him and His son. From a historicist perspective, this image refers not only to the relationship between the King and the father God but also of God the father and God the Son. The image of this Psalms is also one where “Jesus, the Anointed One, the Word, God’s spokesman, speaks in turn, interpreting God’s great declaration of His Sonship.”²¹ As Psalm 2 has shown, the metaphor of father and son can be portrayed by more than one subject [Jesus] so that, “the literal level of a metaphor might itself be ambiguous or multiple, and the reader should have the courage to identify it as such.”²²

Psalm 68:6 portrays God as the “father of orphans and protector of widows.” The divine reality of God’s compassion is incorporated into the image of the father who cares for the fatherless. The relationship between the vehicle father and the referent God as portrayed in Psalm 68 can be illustrated by Ricoeur’s comment, “Not only are the two planes of the sign and discourse distinct, but the first is an abstraction of the second; in the last analysis, the sign owes its very meaning as sign to its usage in the discourse.”²³ In line with Ricoeur’s statement, a historicist interpretation of Biblical metaphor leads to the conclusion that God dialogues with humanity through literary images to reveal his mysterious discourse. God, therefore, is not a product of human language; rather humanity is a product of God’s language.

In Psalm 89:27, the Psalmist describes God as the all-powerful creator who makes the heavens and controls the natural phenomena. In verse 27, the all-powerful transcendent creator shifts to the personal father God. Dahood describes the structure of this Psalm as a psalm where the Israelite king prays for deliverance from his enemies. The first section (vss. 2–5) is followed by a hymn to the Creator (vss. 6–19). Then it introduces a messianic oracle (vss. 20–38) rehearsing the glorious promises to David (cf. 2 Sam 7:8–16) that sharply contrast with the king’s defeat and humiliation set forth in vss.²⁴

21 NICHOL, 1978, p. 634.

22 RYKEN, 1982, p. 16.

23 RICOEUR, 2003, p. 256.

24 DAHOOD, 2008, p. 311.

Psalms 103:3 also portrays another image of God's fatherhood. "As a father pities his children, so the LORD pities those who fear Him." An iconographic analysis of the image of God pitying his children ultimately leads to the question; to what extent is God like a human father? When the question boils down to anthropomorphic use of divine language, P.W Macky argues that biblical writers saw real/imaginary as a universal dichotomy where the meaning of those two terms comes results from experience.²⁵ However, such dichotomy appears to be more in line with Platonic dualism than with the holistic world of the Hebrew Bible.²⁶ The images portrayed in the Psalms above equate God with the abstract concepts of pity, protection, and fatherhood. Thus, there is an overlap between God and the ideal human father. In another instance Macky says, "the line between real and imaginary is fuzzy." From a historicist perspective, we could opt for saying that the line between the characteristics of God and imperfect human fathers is fuzzy.

IMAGE OF FATHERHOOD IN ANE ICONOGRAPHY

Having traced the main metaphors of God as father in the Psalms we now turn to its ANE counterpart. Continuing in line with Klingbeil's thought, we will analyze the father god images in the ANE in their geocentric context. As a result, father roles were based on the religious values of such nations. In order to understand the image of God as father in the Psalms in this section, we will conduct a brief survey of iconographic images of father gods in Mesopotamian, Syrian, and Egyptian myths. Once we have done this, we will try to develop the ANE conception of fatherhood and later compare it and contrast with the Hebrew worldview.

²⁵ MACKY, 1990, p. 198.

²⁶ See KLINGBEIL, 2012.

IMAGES OF FATHERHOOD IN MESOPOTAMIA



Figure 2 Assyrian Brick depicting King amidst father deity

“Religious literature in Mesopotamia has a history that spans more than two and a half millennia.”²⁷ The major protagonist in the Mesopotamian father myths is the god Enlil. The Mesopotamian literary images portray an interesting concept of fatherhood. For instance, the god Enki is born from the sexual relation between the sky god and the earth goddess. Consequently, once he is born, Enki makes the separation of the firmament in the form of the air. Having consolidated his position as chief god in the Mesopotamian pantheon, Enki goes on to establish his line of gods. As seen in the last section about ANE father-roles, Enki must perform these roles in his new position as father of gods and man.

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Though Mesopotamian father roles require the gods to take care of their human subjects, they are depicted as breaking those roles. For instance, in the epic of Gilgamesh, Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh how the gods flooded the earth. According to Utnapishtim, the chief father god Enlil flooded the earth due to human nosiness. The survival of the human race represented by Utnapishtim and his family only furthered Enlil’s anger. As one can see from this story, the gods protected humankind, but were also very vengeful. In another literary instance, the Mesopotamian father gods are portrayed in completely anthropomorphic terms. The story of the formation of the Mesopotamian pantheon illustrates this:



Figure 3 Assyrian Tile depicting winged solar disk weather god

Ama[kandu] married Earth, his mother; He killed Hain, his [father, and] Laid [him] to rest in Dunnu, the city which he loved.²⁸ And then the cycle repeats “Lahar, son of Amakandu, went [and] Killed Amakandu and in Dunnu, In the ... of [hi]’s father, laid [him] to rest. He married [Se]a, [hi]’s mother.”²⁹

27 VELDHUIS, 2003, p. 16.
 28 PRITCHARD, 1969, p. 518.
 29 Idem.

On the other hand, father gods were also responsible for the protection of the monarch and consequently the nation. In the ninth century Assyrian brick in Fig 2, the figure of a monarch is depicted paying homage to his chief father god in order to secure the god's protection of both his nation and himself.

Aside from their human characteristics, the Mesopotamian father gods are also depicted as protectors and law givers. Figure 3, for instance, is a glazed tile 28x46x8 from Assur depicting an image dating to the time of Tukulti-Ninurta II (890-884 B.C), in which the Assyrian god Samas is striding on a sun disk and is armed with a bow. The Assyrian king is seen in the lower corner of the image underneath

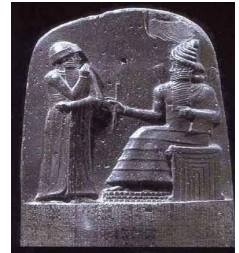


Figure 4 Stele from Hammurabi code

the god who “directs his arrows at the enemies of the Assyrian king.”³⁰ Aside from protection the Mesopotamian father gods are also associated with instruction. In Fig 4, the relief of Hammurabi illustrates this concept quite well. The stele of Hammurabi consists of a block of black diorite stone. On the front side of the stele is a base relief of Hammurabi (1792-1750 B.C) receiving the law code from the father god Shamash. As the protégé of the god, Hammurabi receives instruction from this father deity in order to legislate over his nation as father/king of Babylon. This stele represents quite well the image of the father god giving instruction to his kingly son. Father gods were not only responsible for protecting their children, but also for giving them instruction and an ethical moral code.

Having briefly sketched out the images of fatherhood in Mesopotamia we can see some common themes. By looking at both the literary and graphic images of the Mesopotamian father gods, we can conclude that they are progenitors, defenders of their loyal subjects, and instructors who give ethical instructions to their human subjects. However, these three aspects of the Mesopotamian father deities are expressed in purely human terms. Due to the similarity between Sumerian and Babylonian myth, in comparing the story of Enlil and Ninil above with the image of the god Shamash, one can see how the Mesopotamian father gods were sexual beings who are depicted breaking their

³⁰ KLINGBEIL, 2007, p. 63.

own instructions. They nurture and protect their human subjects, but can they can also be very brutal as the Epic of Gilgamesh illustrates. In addition to this, father and mother gods live in dysfunctional family relationships marked by discord, rivalries, jealousy, incest, and fratricide. As result of their behavior seen in both iconographic and textual sources, their moral description fits well with the geocentric character of the Mesopotamian gods.

IMAGES OF FATHERHOOD IN EGYPT

Having briefly sketched the usage of god image in Mesopotamian iconography, we now turn to its expression in Egyptian art and religion. In our study we will succinctly look at Egyptian representations of father gods in a relief of Akhenaten’s family during the Amana period and a conventional line drawing of Egyptian cosmology. The Amarna period was

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a time of centralized worship of Aton the sun god by Pharaoh Akhenaten. The hymn to Aton portrays an interesting image of an Egyptian father god. The hymnist begins by praising the god: Hail to you, Aton, Sundisk of day, who have fashioned all things and made them to live; Great Falcon with many-hued plumes, Scarab who raised himself up by himself, who came to existence all by himself, not being born, Elder Horus in the midst of the sky, offered shouts of joy at his rising and setting, who created and formed the earth [...] Brave Protector who tends his flocks, who is their shelter, giving them life.³¹

The reading of the Hymn to Aton above parallels the literary image of Fig. 5, in which “the iconography of the winged sun disk, like the wings of the Horus falcon, is often associated with the protection of the king.”³² Fig 5 represents a relief of Akhenaten’s family under the sun disk. It is a wall relief relief dating to the eighteenth dynasty roughly around 1350



Figure 5 Akenhaten with Family amidst Aton

³¹ FOSTER; HOLLIS, 1995, p. 57.

³² LEMON, 2010, p. 152.

B.C. The royal family is seated with their children underneath the protective rays of the chief father deity Aton. This depiction is clearly in line with Akhenaten's religious attempt to implement the sole worship of Aton. However, the Amarna period (1377-1358) was unique for Akhenaten's reign, and it would not outlast him. Soon traditional polytheistic religion was back in place. This can be visualized by Fig 6 and 7. Whereas Fig 5 tended to focus on Akhenaten's relationship to the sun, the Fig 6 and 7 below portray a conventional representation of Egyptian cosmology. Fig 6 comes from a painting on a mummy case. It depicts a typical representation of the Egyptian world in which the air god Shu holds his sky mother goddess Nut on the foundation of his earth father god Geb. Fig 7 is a papyrus fragment dating to the New Kingdom (1570-1085 B.C) depicting a similar motif as Fig 6. On the other hand, contrary to Fig 6, it depicts a more elaborate representation of the cosmos with the sun barge going around the body of Nut. As in conventional representations of



Figure 6 Shu on top of Geb with Nut

the Egyptian cosmos, the earth god Geb is seen underneath Nut with the air god Shu in between holding the foundations of the earth. In this painting it is interesting to note also the sun god riding on the barge with world order (*Maat*). Just as in Hammurabi's code, law and order are intrinsically connected to the gods, or as Othmar Keel puts it, "Expressed in ANE terms world order

is the daughter of the sun god."³³

Having briefly surveyed these two images, one glimpses a basic parallel with the myth of Enlil and Ninlil. However, contrary to Mesopotamian cosmology, the earth is masculine and the sky feminine since, "Egypt was made fertile by the Nile not the sky."³⁴ Just as in the Mesopotamian account, the air god is created as the result of the relation between the father god (earth), and the mother

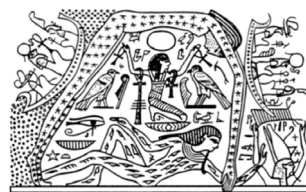


Figure 7 Nut overarching Geb with Shu in the middle

33 KEEL, 1997, p. 36.

34 Idem, 31

goddess (sky). Both of these two images underscore the Egyptian motif of father gods as sexual beings who create and establish order in the cosmos. This iconographic description of the world fully harmonizes with the geocentric Egyptian worldview.

IMAGES FATHERHOOD IN SYRIA

In ancient Canaan the chief father god was El. However, El was soon ousted by Baal who became “the most important active figure of the Canaanite pantheon.”³⁵ Similarly to the Egyptian and Mesopotamian deities, the Canaanite gods portrayed all the qualities and defects of their human counterparts.

The images in Fig 8 and 9 illustrate well the main father and mother deities of the Canaanite pantheon. Fig 8 is an eighteenth century B.C cylinder seal depicting the god Baal with conventional club in hand next to his consort Aserah. This scene fits into the traditional wedding banquet scene where Ba'al-Zaphon and Aserah are being approached by dressed figure probably representing the king. The goddess intercedes for the king as he approaches the weather god. As seen previously in the Mesopotamian section, the king is constantly seen asking for the favor of his father and mother deities. The image of the nude goddess further accentuates the geocentric aspect of the Canaanite gods showing their moral character which resembled closely their human subjects. Fig 8 displays the same motif as Fig 8 though with some slight variations. Whereas in Fig 8, the weather god is behind the king/suppliant, in Fig 9, the suppliant is first facing the goddess. This depiction is in line with other banquet scenes in which the king must first pass through the mother deity who intercede for him on behalf of the chief father deity.

Recent archaeological excavations at Kuntillet Ajrud have shed new light on Canaanite worship. Several cultic objects and figurines were found like the one in Fig. 10.³⁶ Figure



Figure 8 Image of Baal and Aserah

³⁵ ALBRIGHT, 1965, p. 124.

³⁶ NAKHAI, 2001, p. 189.

10 displays a terracotta figurine of a nude female deity. This figurine is probably one of many depictions of Aserah found throughout Syria-Palestine. A typological analysis of these conducted by James Maier led him to say, “on the evidence of the contextual places the Type 1 plaque [10] in the late Bronze



Figure 9 Divine Banquet scene

A figurines Pritchard whole the dating [Figurine period].³⁷

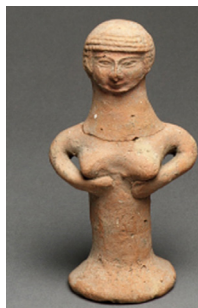


Figure 10 Aserah Figurine

Thus Fig 10 would correspond to roughly between 1550-1200 B.C. It is interesting to see in this figurine how the goddess is depicted. According to Maier, Aserah was, “the goddess of the erotic, sexual vigor, love, grace and beauty.”³⁸ The nude figurine highlights these characteristics. In analogy to Mesopotamian and Egyptian cosmology the earth is renewed through the relation of Aserah with Baal. On the other hand, contrary to Egyptian cosmology, Aserah is represented as the earth and Baal as the god of thunder who dwells in the sky.

Though Aserah is constantly associated with Baal, she was typically depicted as the consort of El. Briefly studying the myth of Aserah and Baal; one sees the geocentric character of Canaanite religion. In one episode, once she failed to seduce the god Baal, Aserah complained to the god El. As the story goes, hearing her complaint, the father god El told her to deal with Baal as she wishes.³⁹

A final analysis of Canaanite father deities leads to the conclusions that, like their Egyptian and Mesopotamian counterparts, they were sexual beings who created the earth. Aside from creating the earth, the deities also had an intercessory role in protecting the king and defending him from his adversaries. According to the established methodology for this paper, the Canaanite deities fit well into the geocentric frame of the ANE.

37 MAIER, 1986, p. 81-82

38 Idem, 85

39 Idem, 123.

COMPARISON BETWEEN HEBREW AND ANE IMAGES

In the iconographical analysis for this present study, we will take the contextual approach to comparative studies, “which embraces both parallels and contrasts in the comparison of the ANE.”⁴⁰ When applying this contextual approach between the images of God as father in the Psalms and those of the father gods in the ANE, one perceives a common denominator between the two; that is the prevalent theme of creation tied along with fatherhood. Creation is one of the backdrops from which the previous literary images in the Psalms and pictorial images in the ANE draw their conception of God as father. In an iconographic analysis between the two, one can see a number of similarities and differences between these two world views.

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First, when comparing the images of God as father in the Psalms with those found in Mesopotamian religion above one soon notices some similarities. Both Yahweh and Enlil created the world. Yahweh like the Mesopotamian gods is also the divine lawgiver who commands kings to be instructed and to fear Him as Psalm 2:11 shows. However, while Enlil creates the air through his relation with the goddess Ninil, Yahweh, who is above human sexuality creating “the heavens through his love” as Psalm 89:3 *ex nihilo*. In Psalm 2, Yahweh like the bearded Assyrian god in Figure 3 defends His chosen king against the attacks of the king’s enemies. However, Yahweh does not break the covenant He makes with His people, contrary to the Mesopotamian gods. Unlike Enlil, Yahweh destroys the earth due to man’s depraved moral state and not to the unbearable noise that prevents Him from sleeping.

Second, when comparing Egyptian iconography from the Amarna period with divine father images from the Psalms, it is interesting to note the “paradox of divine presence, namely the way God appears to be both immanent and transcendent in this Psalm.”⁴¹ Similarly, both Yahweh and Aton are uncreated beings.

⁴⁰ KLINGBEIL, 1999, p. 278.

⁴¹ LEMON, 2010, p. 152.

Both are omnipotent beings who protect their followers, though they are enthroned high up in the sky. In addition to this, it is interesting to note that the similarities between the monotheistic Yahweh and the Sun god Atone of Akhenaten emerge after the Israelites left Egypt in 1446 B.C.⁴² On the other hand, though they present similar characteristics, they are also very different. Contrary to Egyptian thinking, Yahweh is not associated with natural phenomena; rather he controls it (cf. Psalm 29). Aton is constantly associated with the sun disk or the scarab *h.f.r.*, and his image is embodied in this natural visible entity, whereas Yahweh is not reduced to nature, rather he creates nature itself.

Finally, in comparing Syro-Palestinian iconography with that of the Psalms, one notices a series of similarities and contrasts. Baal and his consort Aserah are sexual beings who are responsible for the natural phenomena whereas Yahweh transcends sexuality and also transcends nature. Baal is constantly depicted with a club in hand which he uses to smite the heavens and bring about rain for his children, whereas Yahweh controls all of the natural phenomena as Psalm 89 shows.

Having compared the image of God as father in the Psalms with that of the father deities in the ANE, one sees that Richard Dawkins' definition of Old Testament God as an "unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully"⁴³ fits rather well with a description of the ANE father deities. On the other hand, Ellen White's statement of how, "From the minutest atom to the greatest world, all things, animate and inanimate, in their unshadowed beauty and perfect joy, declare that God is love,⁴⁴" captures well the essence of fatherhood seen in the Psalms; that is God's love and protection for his created universe and for humanity created in His image.

⁴² For an early date of the Exodus see VEEN; THEIS; GORG, 2010, p. 15-25.

⁴³ DAWKINS, 2006, p. 51.

⁴⁴ WHITE, 1911, p. 678.

CONTEMPORARY VIEWS OF GOD AS FATHER

At the start of the twenty-first century the metaphor of God as father has been severely criticized especially by post-modern hermeneutics. On the one hand, this attack has been headed by the liberation movements such as feminism. Biblical scholars like Phyllis Tribble, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, and Teresa Forcades have opted for a rereading of the biblical text in order “to reclaim the image of God female.”⁴⁵ Though their critique of the male subjugation of women throughout modern history makes a valid point, their conception of God as an oppressive male master is anachronistic and falls short of the literary and iconographic images. As comparative study of Biblical literary textual data with extra biblical iconographical data has shown, the Hebrew God is very different from the anthropocentric feminist view. As the literary images have shown, He is seen protecting widows, orphans, and other marginalized classes of society. As a result, the feminist conception of God is an anachronistic reiteration of the geocentric view of God seen in our study in the previous section on ANE iconography.

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On the other hand, the view of God as father has been severely criticized by the new philosophical movement known as the New Atheism. Its main expositors, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennet, and the late Christopher Hitchens argue that the Bible advocates an image of a totalitarian father God who wants to bully his children around and prevent them from experiencing the pleasures of this earth in order to do his imaginary wishes. However an analysis of the images of God as father in the Psalms shows quite a different view. God is concerned for the wellbeing of his covenant people just as a father is concerned for his children's. The Psalms show the image of a God who is creator, provider and sustainer of his people. Though the New Atheism's critique of religious fanaticism is relevant for further discussion, just like the feminist view before it, it has mistaken the theocentric world view of God depicted

⁴⁵ TRIBBLE, 1982, p. 17.

in the Psalms for the geocentric worldview seen in the ANE and later in humanistic western philosophy.

SUMMARY

As we have seen, in the ANE, “God as father motif was associated with the roles of progenitor [creator], provider, intercessor, and claim to obedience.”⁴⁶ Both YHWH and the gods of the ANE fulfill these characteristics. YHWH is the creator of the world (Psalm 89:7); He is the protector of His loyal kin; He provides for the fatherless and orphans (Psalm 68:6); He intercedes on behalf of his chosen son (Psalm 89:27); and he claims obedience throughout the Psalms and the Old Testament. On the other hand, while the ANE father gods create humanity, they are also created beings. While they provide and defend their protégés they are also very vengeful. Finally, they require humanity to obey their laws which they constantly break. The image of the ANE father gods are truly idols. In this moment, Klingbeil’s quote on the risks of mistaking the icon for the idol are very suitable to this discussion. He states, “The iconoclastic debate of church history has warned against the icon becoming the idol, which happens when the deity’s power is harnessed within the physical structure of the image.”⁴⁷ This phenomenon has not only happened with catholic theology but with the polytheistic religions of the ANE. This risk is still present in modern conceptions of God such as feminist theology which believes that “to reclaim the image of God female is to become aware of the male idolatry that has long infested faith.”⁴⁸ The image of God as father in the Psalms is wholly different from the geocentric conceptions of fatherhood seen in the ANE and in our individualistic post-modern society. God is ineffable or as Karl Bart puts it, “[God] gives himself to be known and for that reason we cannot conceive of him, all our concepts

⁴⁶ TASKER, 2002, p. 57.

⁴⁷ KLINGBEIL, 2007, p. 63.

⁴⁸ TRIBBLE, 1982, p. 17.

being fundamentally no more than attempts to do so, denoting, describing, and expounding.”⁴⁹ True fatherhood can only be conceived through God’s revelation. By His revelation, humanity can glimpse into His character so that it conforms to His image.

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⁴⁹ BARTH, 1990, p. 356.

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