God: The Beginnings

Instructor

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Institution

Harvard College, a private, four-year liberal arts college

Course Level and Type

Undergraduate and graduate-level seminar

Hours of Instruction

28 hours (2 hours/week x 14 weeks)

Enrolment and Year Last Taught

8 students/1997; 7 students/1998

Course Description

The figure of God, the most important divine being in the history of the western version of the world, is rooted in a west Semitic deity who first appears in the cultic texts of the area of ancient Syria-Palestine known as Canaan in the mid-second millennium B.C.E. This deity, known as 'El (commonly "El"), is the supreme member of a pantheon of gods and goddesses known to the modern western world until very recently largely through the Hebrew Bible, the sacred writings of ancient Israelites, where, with the sole exception of 'El, these divine beings were condemned and suppressed for over three thousand years. Since the discovery, in 1928, of thousands of cuneiform texts at Ras Shamra (ancient Ugarit) on the Syrian coast, the identities of these long-suppressed divine figures, including 'El, have emerged with new and startling clarity. This course will examine the figure of 'El as he is portrayed in the mythological and cultic texts from Ugarit, and as he is found in inscriptions from ancient Syria-Palestine. In particular, this course will examine 'El's description as divine patriarch in the Ugaritic pantheon, his relationships to other members of that pantheon, and his relationships to his human devotees. A number of questions will assist in focusing this examination: What is a god? What attributes distinguish divine beings from one another and from non-divine beings? Which characteristics of the figure of 'El are emphasized in Canaanite religion and which are not? Can one detect any development in the depiction of 'El? If so, in what direction(s)? What is 'El's relationship to the cosmos?

Logistics and Communication

This seminar will meet once a week, on Thursday afternoons from 3-5 p.m. in the Coolidge Room in Lowell House. Our meetings will focus on presentations and discussions of the primary and secondary readings assigned for that week. I will provide background material for each session, as necessary. The best way to contact me is by email: mcafee@fas.harvard.edu. I usually check email more than once a day and ordinarily respond as soon as I receive a message. You may also reach me in my office in Lowell House, A-22, where I
am the Allston Burr Senior Tutor; the number there is 495-2283, and the person who will usually answer the phone is Tracy Marshall. I am there Monday afternoons from 1-3, Wednesday mornings from 9-11, and Friday afternoons from 2-4. You may have to wait a bit if I am working with students from Lowell House during those hours. Given that you have 24-hour-a-day email access to me, it should not be necessary for you to call me at home.

Requirements

1. attendance at and participation in all weekly meetings (1 absence may be excused with prior notification of the instructor; beyond this, you risk exclusion from the course, on which see the Handbook for Students 1998-99, pp. 296, 323); this portion of the course counts for 50% of the final grade;
2. one class presentation of assigned readings (15% of the final grade), to be submitted the following week as
3. one 5-7-page paper on assigned readings (10% of the final grade); and
4. one 10-12-page final paper on an approved topic of the student's choosing, due by 5:00 p.m. on Friday, Jan. 15, 1999 (the last day of the fall reading period), in the Lowell House Office (A-22); a 100-word proposal for that paper is due Nov. 19 (25% of the final grade).

Texts
(numbers 1-4 for purchase at the Harvard Coop)

Coogan, Michael D. Stories from Ancient Canaan (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1987);
Parker, Simon B. The Pre-Biblical Narrative Tradition: Essays on the Ugaritic Poems Keret and Aqhat (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989);
A Bible (any version is satisfactory, although the New Revised Standard Version published as the HarperCollins Study Bible is recommended);
McAfee, Eugene C. Coursebook for the Study of 'El (marked with * in the following syllabus);
Craigie, Peter C. Ugarit and the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983 (on reserve at Lamont Library);

Additional reserve readings at Lamont Library (marked with ** in the following syllabus).

Syllabus

Week 1 (9/17/98)

Introduction to the course: goal, method, sources, mechanics, readings. Introduction to the study of God. Introduction to ancient literature I: oral and written literature.

Readings:

Selected visual representations of the God of the west.

*King, Martin Luther, Jr. Speech at the Lincoln Memorial, August 23, 1963 (audiotape).
Week 2 (9/24/98)

Introduction to ancient literature II: the nature and function of myth. Introduction to the study of ancient religions: the nature of the evidence.

Required Readings:


Additional Readings:


Week 3 (10/1/98) Canaan and the Canaanites: history, geography, language, literature. Canaanite religion: introductory overview.

Required Readings:


Additional Readings:


Required Readings:


Additional Readings:


Week 5 (10/15/98) 'El in Canaan and elsewhere: etymology, meanings, functions.

Required Readings:


Additional Readings:


Week 6 (10/22/98) 'El the creator

Required Readings:


Additional Readings:


Week 7 (10/29/98) 'El the patriarch and 'El the head of the pantheon

Required Readings:

Genesis 35, 49; Numbers 24; Judges 9; Deuteronomy 32; 1 Kgs 22:1-40; Job 1-2; Psalms 18 (cf. 2 Sam 22), 21, 47, 73, 78, 82, 107; Isaiah 6; Jeremiah 23


Additional Readings:


Week 8 (11/5/98) 'El and Baal: Parentage and conflict

Required Readings:


Additional Readings:


Week 9 (11/12/98) 'El the divine patron I: Kirta

Required Readings:


Additional Readings:


Week 10 (11/19/98, paper proposals due; no class 11/26/98, Thanksgiving Day) 'El the divine patron II: Dan'el

Required Readings:


Additional Readings:


Week 11 (12/3/98) 'El the divine patron III: Abraham

Required Readings:

Genesis 11:27-25:18; 28; Exodus 3, 6


Additional Readings:


Week 12 (12/10/98) 'El the divine warrior and the divine judge

Required Readings:

Exodus 15, 19; Judges 4-5; Psalms 29, 68, 114; Isaiah 51; Habakkuk 3 The book of Daniel (esp. ch. 7)


Additional Readings:

**Wilson, Robert R. "This World--and the World to Come." Encounter 38 (1977) 177-124.
Week 13 (12/17/98) Conclusions: Whence and whither 'El?

Pedagogical Reflections

This course is designed to introduce students to the idea that the deity commonly thought of simply as "God" has a history, and a very particular one in the two numerically dominant religions of North America, Judaism and Christianity. The roots of this deity lie in the religions of western Asia Minor in the middle of the second millennium B.C.E., commonly known as Canaanite religions. The principal source of texts from this region and period is Ugarit. The goal of this course is to expose students to the primary texts from Ugarit and other locations in Syria-Palestine, with special attention to the depiction of the deity El. In this process, students will also be introduced to basic historical, archaeological, social, geographical, and methodological issues related to the study of the religions of the ancient Near East. The most successful aspects of the course were the primary readings (translations of the major Ugaritic texts by M. D. Coogan), and my background presentations to and exegeses of the primary texts; the least successful aspects of the course were some of the more complex secondary readings (such as F. M. Cross) and the student presentations of primary texts. Although I remain committed to the pedagogical value of student presentations for the presenters, for the other members of the seminar, the value can vary widely.

http://www.wlu.ca/~wwwaar/syllabi/god_the_beginnings_mcafee.html

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