Snell, Daniel C.

*Religions of the Ancient Near East*


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*Religions of the Ancient Near East* can in essence be described as an overview of the history of religious ideas and practices in the ancient Near East from the Neolithic period (roughly 8000 B.C.E.) to the time of Alexander the Great’s invasion of Palestine (330 B.C.E.). It is thus a *historical*, not a *theological*, study. The book is intended for a general audience interested in a broad orientation of the history of religious life in the ancient Near East, not as a textbook or reference source for the specialist. The book is exceptionally suitable as a handbook for undergraduate students in ancient Near Eastern studies.

The author, Daniel C. Snell, needs no introduction to readers familiar with publications on the ancient Near East. Apart from numerous scientific articles, he has published a number of books on Akkadian and ancient Near Eastern cultural-historical studies. He is the L. J. Semrod Presidential Professor in the Department of History at the University of Oklahoma. The author’s knowledge of and experience in the field of ancient Near Eastern studies is clearly reflected in the present publication. He opens a world to readers not familiar with those ancient societies. Short vignettes “imagining” the religious experience of the various ancient Near Eastern societies introduce each chapter. These vignettes, partly based on imagination and partly on archaeological evidence, are important aids to help readers re-create the religious life of the peoples of the ancient Near East.
It is a pleasure to read these 179 pages. The writing style is fluent, the argumentation sound, the historical overview comprehensive, but without minute detail. I shall not attempt to describe the content of the book in detail. My very concise overview cannot do justice to the detail in the book. It will, however, illustrate the broad scope of the book and its suitability as an introduction to the religious history of the ancient Near East.

The book contains seventeen chapters. Chapter 1 ("Defining Time and Space," 1–6) defines the expression “ancient Near East” in temporal and geographical terms. It contains a map (3) and timeline (6) aiding modern readers in reconstructing the ancient world that will unfold in the following chapters. Chapter 2 ("Early Inklings," 7–13) is based on the archaeological evidence from Çatalhöyük, a Neolithic settlement from around 7000 B.C.E., and the gradual growth of settlements on the Iraqi plain from 5500 B.C.E. onward. Evidence from Çatalhöyük suggests that ancestral veneration was practiced. From Eridu comes evidence of an early temple dedicated to Enki. As settlements increased, various gods were related to each other through syncretism, and the growth of a pantheon became a distinct reality.

Chapters 3 ("Gods, Gods, Gods," 14–29) and 4 ("Cities, States and Gods," 30–53) cover the history of religious life in Mesopotamia from the fourth millennium B.C.E. to the Old Babylonian period. Snell maintains (ch. 3) that a god was not necessarily regarded as immortal, omniscient, or all-powerful (17). Heroes could be deified after death (18). A god did, however, have “extraordinary power and success” and could exert it “over distance and perhaps over time” (19). Different types of gods were involved in human affairs, and temples were dedicated to them. Prominent were Enlil of Nippur (21), Enki of Eridu (21–23), and two types of goddesses (mother goddesses and goddesses of love and war, such as Inanna/Ishtar, 23–26). In the case of the goddesses, a process of identification of qualities is apparent (23). Apart from the “great gods” (27), lesser (local) gods were venerated at different locations (27). “Personal” gods played a role in protecting and aiding individual worshipers in the presence of the “great gods” (27–28). Demons could “maliciously afflict you for no reason at all” (28), and sometimes the great gods show malevolence towards human beings (29). Thus magic and magic spells became important instruments to ward off these negative influences (29).

The gradual growth of city-states along the great rivers of Mesopotamia had a profound influence on religious traditions (ch. 4). Large temple complexes in, for instance, Uruk, housed the temples of the great gods, now regarded as a family (32). Scribes started to keep records of provisions allocated to the houses of the gods. Rivalry between growing cities caused the building of walls around them, and the concept of patron deities of various city-states became commonplace. Conflict between city states became a conflict between their patron deities (33). The political power of some city states grew, and
amalgamation of settlements took place. The process culminated in the establishment of Sargon of Akkad’s empire. It implied the demise of some local gods, the continuous importance of the “great gods” An, Enki, Enlil, Inanna, and Ninhursag, and the rise to power of other gods, such as Utu/Shamash and Nanna/Sin (33–34). Sargon deliberately tried to “combine the priesthoods of Inanna at Uruk and of Nanna, the moon-god, at Ur” (35) in the person of his daughter, Enheduana. Sargon’s successors claimed “that rulers were divine during their lifetime” (35). The legacy of the Old Akkadian Dynasty lived on (36), but the “overweening pride” of Sargon’s successors, especially Naram-Sin, was frowned upon in later times (37). The demise of the empire promoted the importance of local deities of city-states once again, as can be seen in the many monumental and literary artifacts attributed to Gudea of Lagash (38–39). A renewed sense of human dependence saw the growing need for “direction from the god through dreams and omens” (39), a tendency clearly visible during the Ur III period (40–44), although kings were worshiped as gods after their deaths. The fall of the Ur III state saw the rise of a new empire under the leadership of the famous Amorite king Hammurabi (44–53). The “great gods” were still worshiped, but the period saw a rise in the importance of “personal” gods. Hammurabi never claimed divinity. He is famous for his long inscription (erroneously called a “law code”) with its emphasis on justice and the responsibility of the king to care for the downtrodden. Omen literature flourished during the period. The period also saw the gradual rise to power of Assyria (49–50) and the rise of the Hittite Empire (50–53).

Chapters 5 (“The Lure of Egypt, 4000–1400 BCE,” 54–65), 6 (“The Gods of Egypt,” 66–71), 7 (“The Akhenaten Dream, 1350–1300 BCE,” 72–79) and 8 (“Practice in Egypt,” 80–83) are concerned with religious life in Egypt from 4000 B.C.E. until Akhenaten’s failed religious experiment (ca. 1300 B.C.E.). The discussion commences with the building of the Step Pyramid of Djoser (55). Snell asserts the importance of the Nile for survival in Egypt (56–57) and indicates that the “assertion that people lived on after their deaths” (57) can be discerned from early times in burial practices. People were buried together with “pots and trinkets” (57), indicating that death was regarded as a journey imitating the sun’s daily journey to the west (57). The life and death of the king were regarded as significant (58), because he was regarded as a god (59–60). It culminated around 2500 B.C.E. in the building of the great pyramids, “grandiose tombs” for the deceased king-god (60). From the Twelfth Dynasty onward the notion of the “weighing of hearts” became influential and had great impact outside Egypt as well (62). From the Old Kingdom and after, “instruction” literature gained importance. In both these developments, the notion of ma’at “justice,” so central to Egyptian society, played an important role (62–64). Chapter 6 is concerned with the Egyptian gods and covers a variety of subjects, ranging from the significance of the sphinx (66–67) to “local” gods (68) and their development to the major gods such as Amun, Isis, Ma’at, and Seth (69–71). Chapter 7 focuses on the enigmatic
figure of Akhenaten and his religious reforms. His attempt to exalt one particular deity, the sun-disk (Aten), at the cost of all other gods was innovative but “seen by later Egyptians as the height of impiety because he failed to acknowledge the existence of the other gods” (76). Shortly after his death, “the old gods were revered again” (78), but Akhenaten’s influence upon “the realm of art and of language” (78) surpassed his death. Chapter 8 contains a short description of the archaeological site of Lahun in northern Egypt, “probably … a worker’s village for people working on the nearby pyramid of Senusret II” (81), to give modern readers some insight in the daily life and practices of ordinary Egyptians. It represents one of the many attempts in the book to aid modern readers to “imagine” the religious life of the peoples of the ancient Near East.

Chapters 9 (“The International Age, 1400–1000 BCE,” 84–94) and 10 (“Gods and People,” 95–102) describe how the increase in international contacts influenced religious ideas throughout the ancient Near East. One can document “numerous synchronisms … among the rulers of Egypt and those of other lands, including the Hittite area, the Mitanni Kingdom of northern Syria, Assyria and even Babylonia” (85). Deities of one region were recognized in other regions, although differences between the gods were acknowledged (86). The “internationalization” of gods and ideas can be seen in the popularity of the Epic of Gilgamesh during this period. Snell calls it “Gilgamesh for all” (87–92). Although stories about Gilgamesh, the Early Dynastic king from Uruk, circulated for centuries, copies of the poem from the period 1400–1000 B.C.E. were found “as far from southern Mesopotamia as the Hittite area and also in Israel” (88). Toward the end of the period, the established states of the ancient Near East entered a stage of collapse. Many factors might have contributed to the tendency, not least of all the movements of foreign peoples known from Egyptian sources as the “Peoples of the Sea” (93). Chapter 10 indicates that this led to an increased sense of vulnerability. The notion of fate and divine decrees (97) became important in Mesopotamian society, as did the importance of various forms of divination (97–100) and exorcism (100–2). An important tendency of the time was the decrease in the number of active deities (101–2). Snell indicates that “we find recurring instances of claims in hymns that the powers of one of the great gods were exclusively theirs” (102).

Chapter 11 (“The Lord Is One—Israel in Its Environment,” 103–14) focuses upon the development of Israelite monotheism. In chapter 11 Snell indicates that the Israelites were one of the groups “thrown up by the movements around 1200 BCE” (104). Archaeological evidence suggests an “explosion of the number and size of villages in the hill country of central Israel and the Palestinian West Bank” (104) after 1200 B.C.E. Archaeology cannot attest to the origin of these people; according to the Hebrew Bible they came from Egypt (104). Interaction with Egypt is clear from the Egyptian names of “the several Israelite figures of priestly status,” including Moses and Aaron (104). It is
difficult to use biblical evidence to corroborate archaeological data because most of the
texts come from a much later period (105). The people settling in the hill country lived in
a “religious world … dominated by a pantheon of gods probably headed by the god who
brought rain, called Baal” (105). Early “Israelites” did not differ much from their
Canaanite neighbors. It is difficult to trace “the Israelites’ ethnic self-consciousness” (106)
up to the time of the monarchy, but religiously it can be assumed that “some Israelite
thinkers may have been moving from polytheism toward henotheism” (106). It implies
that “they acknowledged the existence of many gods, but they emphasized the importance
of one for their own group” (106). That god was called Yahweh (107). The kings played
almost no role in the eventual development toward monotheism. Credit for this
development must go to the prophets (108–9), who warned against the worship of any
other gods and threatened Israel with severe punishment should they transgress. The
destruction of the northern kingdom by the Assyrians in 722 B.C.E. gave impetus to the
development of monotheism (110). The crisis of the Judean exile and the influence of the
unknown prophet known as Second Isaiah provided even more impetus to this
development (111). After the edict of Cyrus in 539 B.C.E., returning exiles sealed the
notion of exclusive monotheism by promoting “the purity of the Jewish tradition” (112).

In chapter 12 (“The Turning,” 115–25) Snell contextualizes the development of
monotheism by referring to “what has been called the Axial Age, a period in the middle
of the first millennium BCE in which religious ideas in some places turned on their axes and
headed in a new direction” (115–16). Snell refers to the work of Confucius, the Buddha,
the pre-Socratic Greek philosophers, Zoroaster, and the Hebrew prophets as examples of
this “turning” (116–17). All representatives of the so-called Axial Age emphasized
individual responsibility. It amounted to “a withdrawal from traditional religions received
from earlier antiquity” (117). Egypt and Mesopotamia are noticeably absent in the list
(119–20). In Mesopotamia, the last Babylonian king, Nabonidus, might be an exception
(120). Interest in the individual also raised the problem of righteous suffering, a theme
present in many writings coming from the Axial Age (122–25). The existence of evil
created a logical problem for an absolute monotheism such as Judaism, which “posited
that evil as well as good proceeded from its God” (127). A logical answer to the problem
was provided by the Persians. Snell discusses this in chapter 13 (“The Good God and the
Bad God,” 126–31). In Zoroastrianism, the presence of evil is explained by the continuous
battle between the “good” god, Ahuramazda, and the “evil” god, Ahriman (127). This
dualism, “the assertion of a good god and a bad god … was attractive also to the more
explicitly monotheistic traditions” (129). Thus, in the New Testament “the early Christian
community saw the figure of the devil as a crafty opponent to god’s purposes” (130).

Chapter 14 (“The Lands of Baal,” 132–38) describes Canaanite religious ideas as they are
attested in the Ebla archives (133–34) and the Ugaritic texts (134–35). Especially
important was the position of Baal, the god of rainfall and fertility (133). Ugarit succumbed to the Sea Peoples around 1200 B.C.E., but there were “cultural continuities in Syria and Lebanon” (136) that culminated in Phoenician culture. To the Phoenicians we owe the development of an alphabetical script (136) as well as the spread of Canaanite religious ideas throughout the Mediterranean (137). In chapter 15 (“Greece, Etruria, Rome, and Conveying Traditions,” 139–47) Snell indicates that the peoples of the ancient Near East “had an impact through trade, arms, and the force of ideas” (140) that spread throughout the Mediterranean. Conversely, the peoples of the western Mediterranean also had an impact upon the Near East. “The premier example of such an interaction which had profound and long-lasting influence on the Ancient Near East was the impact of Hellenism” (140). The rise of Rome, however, saw the gradual decline of ancient Near Eastern influence in the West. Chapter 16 (“The Dead Hand of the Past and the Living God,” 148–61) indicates that many ancient Near Eastern religious practices and ideas now seem strange to us (150). However, “continuities in what humans feel and do may in the end be stronger despite technological advances. We still mourn people who die, and we still know that we shall all die one day too, even if our consumer culture refuses to take death into account” (150). Snell indicates that religion as such represents one of the continuities and argues that none of the “great classical explanations of religious behavior” (157; he refers specifically to Thorkild Jacobsen, Rudolph Otto, Emile Durkheim, Marx, Engels, and Max Weber) fully explain ancient Near Eastern religious ideas and practices. However, in spite of the huge distance in time and space, many basic ideas of the ancient Near Eastern religions (especially the wisdom tradition) still echo in modern society (160–61).

Chapter 17 (“Experiencing Ancient Near Eastern Religion,” 162–67) concludes the book with a description of the rituals involved in the Babylonian New Year Festival (162–66). Snell uses it as an example that we are only able to follow these ancient texts and their exact meanings and implications “at a very great distance” while we try “to feel what they might have felt at these great spectacles” (163). He cautions that the study of ancient religious experience is a contentious exercise, often colored by our own views and experiences. He concludes: “We cannot really experience Ancient Near Eastern religion. We can at most imagine. But we should” (167). An impressive list of references (169–76) and an index (177–79) conclude the book.

The short overview of the book’s content illustrates its broad scope. It makes the book ideally suitable as an introduction to the study of the religions of the ancient Near East. Readers looking for answers regarding contentious and specialized issues such as the development of Yahwism will not find answers in the book. But readers interested in a broad orientation in the history of religious life in the entire ancient Near East over a broad time span will discover that reading this book is a delightful experience.