

Bronze Age Religion and Scribal Literacy

1. In this next video tracking the co-evolution of religion and technology we turn to the next major technological revolution, writing. We will see how writing both enables communication beyond earshot and better preserves it down through the generations. By With the creation of a permanent record, memory is no longer required to preserve information. And with communication no longer relying on face to face presence, social organization can expand beyond the village to the rise of the first cities with tens of thousands of residents.
2. Such a concentration of the population will of course require a lot of food. (1) Thus farming evolves into large scale irrigated agricultural estates at the two southern tips of the Fertile Crescent: along the flood plains of the Tigris and Euphrates in Mesopotamia (literally the land between the rivers), and along the Nile in Egypt. Finally technology also evolves at this time (2) for smelting metals from ores: (3) gold and (4) silver, (5) copper and tin.
3. Fusing the latter two, copper and tin in a 9:1 ratio produces bronze, from which one can upgrade pottery utensils and forge light swords and spears that can keep an edge as well as body armor and chariots. All these new technologies will in turn generate vast disparities of power and wealth, enforced by endemic violence both within and between the new cities. Indeed soon enough stronger cities will conquer weaker cities to form kingdoms, and later kingdoms will conquer kingdoms to create empires.
4. All of these technological innovations will thus catalyze a new kind of lifestyle, identity and religion, that archeologists and historians term “the Bronze Age.” It is not that one causes the others but that they evolve together synergistically, In fact if one were to insist upon a “first cause” for the transition from Neolithic village culture to Bronze Age civilization, it may well have been climactic: the increasing desertification of both the Sahara and the Middle East starting in the late sixth millennium. (1) For it is likely these it was these climate disruptions that (2) catalyzed migrations into the flood plains of the Nile and the Tigris-Euphrates.
5. The annual flooding along their shoreline and the perennial swamps in their river deltas had kept humans away. But these now these places came to be seen as beneficent divinities. Sumerian mythology begins with the intermingling of fresh ground water, (1)

personified by the divine father of all life, Apsu, and sea water, personified by the primal maternal womb, Tiamat. From their intermingling muddy earth, like river silt rose up, and from that clay, mortal life would eventually be created. Plants could take root in the dark earth, animals could roam its surface and human beings could build a home. (3) Ancient Egyptian myth recounts a similar story: in the beginning (4) all was water, then gradually a tip of (4) alluvial land would emerge from the waters—of which the pyramids are an icon or symbol. Upon that growing tip of earth, life, light and order, would gradually arise from the primal, dark, watery abyss. So too the Hebrew story of creation and Thales in Anatolian Greece would tell similar stories of the origin of the cosmos from watery chaos.

6. Such cosmotheism generated a loose common grammar and vocabulary, in which the names of the gods could be translated from one culture to another. Just as the Avestas and the Vedas shared many of the same gods under different names, so too Sumerian, Egyptian, Hittite, Greek and Roman gods were often loosely identified with each other. For what they were gods of, elemental cosmic forces and features common to all yet manifested variously in different climates: earth and sky, sun and moon, fire, water and rain. Now different religious myths would give analogous gods different personalities and attributes in different cultures.
7. The Inanna's lament in the last video is the lament of a young lover for her missing beloved, while (1) Demeter's distress is that of a mother for her missing daughter. But in both mimetically re-enacting the seasonal cycle of autumnal withering, winter death, spring fertility and summer rejoicing, devotees of both cults could recognize variations on a common goddess.
8. In Bronze Age religion we find new younger gods personifying new technologies and crafts. Some are extensions of the Neolithic. Thus as we already saw with Indra, Neolithic storm gods, like Marduk, Baal and Yahweh will become gods of the new art of the warrior. Others are new gods, such as (1) the gods of writing, Thoth and Hermes, Nisaba and Nabu and (2) the gods of the forge: Hephestus. Vulcan and Gibil. The Egyptians on the other hand will simply recognize another personae of the ancient God of creation (3) and so too of human creation or crafts, Ptah.

9. So too when one city would conquer another, it would often assimilate its gods. For on the spiritual sphere, the war is between the patron deities of each city, with the victor subjugating or even assimilating altogether the pantheon of the vanquished and its temples. Thus when the Babylonians overthrow the Sumerians, the Sumerian high god (1) Enlil is replaced by Babylon's patron deity (2) Marduk in the myth of creation.
10. Similarly when Persia conquers Babylon, Ahura Mazda, the Zoroastrian God most high, directs Cyrus, the King of Kings to send the Jews back to their homeland to rebuild their temple to the God most high, worshipped by them as Yahweh. Upon the conquest of Egypt, the Persians will similarly fund the rebuilding of temples to the Gods of Egypt.
11. As a result, cosmotheism's pantheon of gods and myths while narratively coherent are often not logically consistent. As we saw, in some myths it is a distraught Inanna who enters the Underworld in search of Dumuzi, in others it is Dumuzi who enters the underworld in search of or deceived by Inanna. But while inconsistent, all versions of the myth mimetically narrate the same cycle of the seasons.
12. So too the same god may enact conflicting persona and manifest conflicting attributes even within the same cultural religion. (1) Athena is the goddess of both wisdom and war. (2) Her brother Apollo shares the same two personae, but with different connotations by virtue of also (3) being a patron of music and the fine arts. Apollo also connotes both the light of intelligence and the dark riddles of the Delphic oracle. The transcultural sweep of the gods of cosmotheism have more affinity to recurrent characters in novels or television series, than to monotheism's personification of universal principles.
13. In the second half of this lecture I wish to focus on the third of the Bronze Age revolutionary technologies mentioned at the outset: the invention of writing. The craft of writing and reading will also have its patron deity: Hermes among the Greeks, Thoth among the Egyptians, Nabu among the Babylonians. the large scale agriculture and large-scale governance characteristic of the Bronze Age, would require effective and efficient communication across time and space. Stores of grain needed to be tracked and tallied. (1) Trade beyond face to face barter would also require more than oral promises. Where the parties to the trade might never actually meet in person, but trade was conducted through intermediaries, reliable certainty over trade agreements was attainable only

through written contracts and the rule of law. (2) Finally the governance of large numbers of people also required written correspondence, (3) legislation, and a judicial bureaucracy to apply the laws in cases of dispute and record their adjudications.

14. Now not everyone involved in agriculture and commerce could learn to read and write for themselves. For early literacy took years of training and access to scarce texts and materials. (1) Literacy was a learned craft, an elite, high status profession. And, like all professions, it was (2) typically inherited, passed down from father to son. To be a scribe, particularly to be a palace or temple bureaucrat, was to belong to an elite social caste.
15. The earliest forms of writing were iconic images that mirrored the objects they stood for. In early Sumer for example we find early clay tablets enclosing clay figurines representing the objects traded. (1) Soon enough the figurines were replaced by icons of them inscribed and baked into the clay. (2) The earliest Chinese characters, Sumerian cuneiform and Egyptian hieroglyphs all consisted in signs that resembled their referents.
16. Over time scripts would become increasingly stylized and come to refer less to objects directly than to semantic categories and attributes. In other words, iconic pictograms evolved into increasingly conventional ideograms. As conventional signs their meaning would not be decipherable on the fly, but would need to be memorized, word by word. With hundreds of such ideograms to learn, literacy would take protracted training. (1) Later yet some scripts would become increasingly phonetic, individual signs for sounds combined together to reproduce the spoken word, rather than having any iconic representation or semantic reference of their own at all. The Greek Beta for example, does not refer to any object or meaning, but to a sound. On the other hand, cuneiform and hieroglyphic writing would evolve into hybrid scripts with both ideographic category markers and phonetic signifiers.
17. A fully phonetic alphabet was invented only once, by the Phoenicians in the early second millennium. A short set of simple signs, letters, represent various spoken consonants. (1) Vowels were first added by the Greeks in the eighth century BCE, greatly assisting in the reading and composition of original texts which quickly proliferated across the Aegean.
18. But unlike writing today even classical alphabetic scripts were still written to be heard. Texts still had no punctuation or even spacing between words. Alphabetic writing thus had to be sounded out. Silent reading was a rare feat. Augustine for example could

still be astonished at Ambrose, who could read without moving his lips. (1) The medium for writing also made a difference. Cuneiform consisted of wedges on clay tablets. Once baked, the text was tough and durable, able to be carried safely across an empire or stored for generations. But a collection of clay tablets was bulky and heavy and brittle. Papyrus on the other hand, while light and flexible, could easily be ruined. Even if well stored, dry and clean, it had a relatively short shelf life. Normally a scroll would last at most three generations, but often less if handled regularly. Over a hundred thousand cuneiform tablets survive. The discovered library of Ashurbanipal alone contains over 30,000 tablets, the Mari archives, a commercial center on the upper Euphrates across from Syria over 20,000. The vast majority of cuneiform tablets are precisely the mundane records, contracts and correspondence that constitutes the workflow of bureaucratic administration. On the other hand, we have virtually no original scrolls, only copies of copies of copies. Much literary scribal writing was consequently actually rewriting. Even new texts were often compendia of multiple older texts. No Hebrew scribe for example ever claimed to be the author of what he wrote.

19. In fact scribal texts were virtually never fully literate compositions. Even the most original were transcriptions of oral performances. Sacred myths, the words and rubrics of sacred rituals, the recording of royal pronouncements, the dictation of diplomatic correspondence, the creation of commercial contract, even prophetic oracles were all dictated *to* scribes, not composed *by* them. Literacy thus begins not as a substitute for the spoken word, but as an enhancement of it. While literacy will eventually precipitate an “axial” revolution of oral culture, its original value lie in its preserving what had been spoken, for it to be recited back aloud at a later time to a different audience. Writing served as an external memory device within what was still a functionally oral culture.
20. Even so, writing nevertheless did contribute to the transformation of society. Record keeping and contracts enhanced and extended trade across hundreds, ultimately thousands of miles. It also enabled the expansion of governance from individual communal bands ruled face to face by family chieftains, to cities of multiple families, to kingdoms of multiple cities and eventually to empires of multiple kingdoms. Ever greater expansion would call for an ever greater quantity of records, covering an ever

wider array of concerns, to be produced, managed and used by an ever larger bureaucracy of scribes.

21. Scribal literacy led to a similar bureaucratizing of religion. Sacred sacrificial rituals were increasingly centralized in sacred temples. We can see this in the condemnation of all sacrificial worship outside the temple in Jerusalem. In fact the fall of Jerusalem is blamed on unsanctioned sacrifices conducted on the “high places” outside temple control. Such traditional agrarian worship practices may or may not have been unfaithful to Yahweh, but they were certainly unfaithful to the temple cult and its priestly bureaucracy. The temple thus effectively mirrored the royal court.
22. Religion was also bureaucratized in that the sacred stories were now themselves thoroughly routinized, recited word for word, time after time, to audience after audience. Rhetorical address became written rubrics ensuring rituals were re-enacted with immutable precision. Prayers and prophecies from generations past were preserved for ages to come. Change characterized the profane, mortal life outside the temple; eternity and immortality, as much as overwhelming power, became touchstones of the sacred.
23. As already mentioned, the training of a scribe was analogous to what we saw for Indo-Aryan priests--lengthy, highly repetitive and tedious. For writing is not natural; it takes practice to train hand and fingers to make precise marks. This was as true for artistic Egyptian hieroglyphs as well as for cuneiform, the script not only of Mesopotamia but of the entire Near East outside Egypt.
24. Scribal training would begin in early youth, with boys either being taught by their scribal fathers or in scribal schools run by courts and temples. One would begin by learning and practicing to write simple logograms, both syllabic signs and short words. Thousands of practice tablets have been found filled with the same signs repeated over and over, the style of the texts ranging from crude to refined. As logograms were mastered, students would move to short aphorisms and literary passages involving increasingly large number of varied signs. By the end whole texts would be copied.
25. These texts would be the literary and religious classics of their culture. Thus as the scribes learned to write, they would also become steeped in the sacred myths and rituals of their culture. The scribe was also the scholar. So too scribes practiced taking dictation, and otherwise transcribing oral performances. Here logographic script was superior even

to alphabetic script, for while it involved far more characters, only one or two would be required to record each word. Indeed, modern secretarial “shorthand” is effectively an alphabetic attempt to imitate the speed of logographic transcription. With a multiple edged stylus incising wedges into soft clay, a well trained scribe would have no trouble keeping up with the flowing speech of his patron.

26. Scribes devoted much of their time and energy memorizing sacred texts, word for word, writing them “on the tablet of their heart” both for oral recitation in public and for prayerful meditation. The Christian practice of *lectio divina*, would involve the slow meditative reading over a passage of sacred scripture, the savoring of even a single phrase of a single verse. Bernard of Clairveau would compare monks ruminating over the scriptures to cows chewing their cud.
27. On the hand the original medium for hieroglyphics was monumental stone columns and walls, giant statues and obelisks. Hieroglyphics is not a script designed for dictation, but for immortalizing the accomplishments of Pharaohs and sacred rituals performed in the temple precincts, even private rituals performed to be performed by the dead Pharaoh, in the burial chamber of his pyramid.
28. In the ritual the ka or life force of the dead Pharaoh would dissociate himself from the sins of his past life one by one to be transformed into the iconic idealization of the pharaonic office, Osiris.
29. His purified ka is then resurrected as a divinity, his ba, to then take flight as the falcon headed Horus, celestially ascending beyond all lesser cosmic divinities by appropriating the power of each, again one by one, to join the supreme God of the cosmos, the deified Sun, Ra, on his celestial barque as it daily sails across the cloudless Egyptian sky, rising as Horus in the East, setting as Osiris, god of the Underworld in the west sailing overnight across the twilight underworld of the ancestral dead.
30. But what would be the point of immortalizing a ritual with no audience or even a living presider? The Egyptologist Jon Assman, from whom I have drawn the idea of framing Bronze age religion generally as a cosmotheism,, has argued that Egyptian religion’s central concern was stability. For the Egyptian, the social order was sacred, personified in the high god Matt, while chaos was always threatening, as the desert sands perennially threated the narrow strip of fertile land dependent upon the annual flooding of the Nile.

Pyramids were icons of permanence, their geometrical shape both manifestations of order and reminders of the original tip of land rising from the watery chaos at the origin of creation. . And they immortalized their Pharaoh's reign in monumental stone. The cycle of life and death, earlier enacted in fertility rituals, is not translated into the immortalization of the Pharaoh, not personally, however as a discrete individual, but as eternal Pharaoh, of an everlasting land and people. It also served to stabilize the transfer of power to his successor, who knew his predecessor to now be a god, overseeing him every day of his own reign in Ra's solar barque.

31. While scribal literacy depends ultimately on oral dictation there remains a significant difference between oral and scribal wisdom that will prove decisive in the evolution of literate culture. Oral wisdom is common to all. It is often explicitly drawn from experience. It is embedded in story and song, performed by bards and storytellers before a common audience. Scribal wisdom, on the hand is restricted to a small educated elite, who alone are able to access it directly, not just in temple tablets and scrolls, but precisely through its having been "written on their heart" through years of schooling. Over time, this scribal wisdom comes to be seen as not just handed down from elders, drawn from their own long experience, but as a revelation of the gods to the original ancestors of civilization itself.
32. An original worldwide flood, a version of which is found in the Noah story, wiped away all but one ancestor, Utnapishtin who now lives eternally at the edge of the world, beyond the waters encircling the known earth. The oral transmission of traditional wisdom has thus been severed, but it remains accessible in writing on tablets preserved and catalogued, copied and memorized by subsequent generations of scribes.
33. Thus wisdom becomes a guild secret, a mystery to outsiders, and over the centuries, an emergent source of scribal political power. Kings at times would also claim to have received revelations of the ancestral wisdom from the gods, but the scribes were the ordinary transmitters and ultimate guarantors of their society's wisdom, enabling them at times, no doubt carefully and diplomatically, to challenge even the word and judgement of the king whose counsellors and ambassadors, clerks and clerics they were.

34. Critical reflection has its earliest roots here. It is not yet the abstract metacritique characteristic of axial thought, but it can be political and even social criticism, in the name of the perennial wisdom of the gods and ancestors.
35. In short scribal literacy is rightly identified with the birth of civilization itself. Writing is the first communication technology that is not a biologically evolved trait, but a fully culturally evolved technology. To become lettered one must attend school. As culture and its attendant technologies continue to evolve, one must attend school longer and longer until now one is legally required to study for a dozen years, with up to a dozen more commonly required to become a professional scholar, a contemporary scribe, oneself.
36. In the next video we shall explore how the rise of income and status inequalities in archaic agrarian city states led to the rise of a third class of imitation, mimetic desire and from there a fourth, mimetic violence that would prove endemic in agrarian society. We shall track how religion evolved to mirror, mitigate and at times exacerbate this rise in human violence.

Suggestions for further reading:

Karel van der Toorn, *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* (Harvard, 2007)

David M Carr, *Writing on the Tablet of the Heart: Origins of Scripture and Literature* (Oxford, 2005)

Marc van de Mieroop, *Philosophy Before the Greeks: The Pursuit of Truth in Ancient Babylonia* (Princeton, 2016)

Trevor Bryce, *Life and Society in the Hittite World* (Oxford, 2002), ch. 3 “the Scribe”

37.