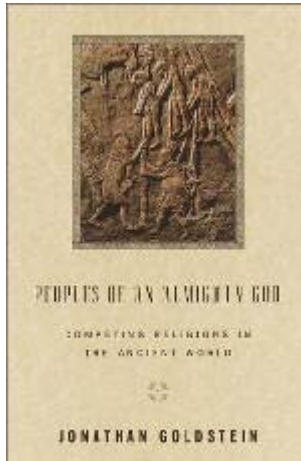


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Goldstein, Jonathan A.

Peoples of an Almighty God: Competing Religions in the Ancient World

Anchor Bible Reference Library

New York: Doubleday, 2002. Pp. xiv + 575, Hardcover, \$36.95, ISBN 0385423470.

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This book innovatively examines different peoples and religions of the ancient Near East. It focuses mainly on Israel and Babylon. While some of Goldstein's claims can be considered speculative, his comparative approach to the history of Israel and Babylon is distinctive and informative. In a creative way, this book situates Israel in its wider setting in the ancient Near East.

The central claim of the book is that both the Israelites and Babylonians can be considered "peoples of an almighty god." He defines "people of an almighty god" as one that "believes that a god stronger than all others combined is ultimately committed to be their protector, though temporarily the people may suffer adversity" (3). Such people understand their god as the creator of the world and seek to explain why not all nations acknowledge the superiority of their god. They also need to make sense of periods in which they suffer while other groups prosper (4-5). He argues that the Israelites constitute such a people.

Goldstein then proceeds to the types of literature that is produced by "peoples of an almighty god." Such peoples, in his view, compose and preserve written histories that explain the role of their god in human history. The author also associates "peoples of an almighty god" with "present-future prophecy." Such prophecies are placed in the mouth of a venerable figure from the past (15). No clear distinction is made between this sort of prophecy and *vaticinium ex eventu*, the usual term for prophecy that is ascribed to someone in the past (e.g., Daniel 11).

The second chapter is devoted to the claim that the Babylonians can also be considered a "people of an almighty god." The Babylonians became, Goldstein argues, a "people of an almighty god" during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar I (1125-1104), during

which Babylonian texts begin to praise the supremacy of Marduk (28). He examines texts that are devoted to the supremacy of Marduk, such as the “Speech of Marduk,” a text in which Marduk, in the first person, explains that he had left Babylon earlier but will return forever during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar I (38). He grants that the Babylonians still produced and copied texts that gave prominence to Enlil (49), and that Marduk’s supremacy might not have been established as late as the time of Nebuchadnezzar II (604-562). This problematizes the claim that the Babylonians are a people of a single “almighty god.”

In chapter three Goldstein argues that the ancient Egyptians and Iranians should be considered “peoples of a nearly almighty god.” This claim reflects his view that they meet some but not all of the criteria he lays out in his definition of a “people of an almighty god.” He contends that Egyptian texts exhibit a “lack of logical rigor” and that Egyptians understood that their deities could be killed (64), and that it is therefore inappropriate to consider them “people of an almighty god.” Since different gods were considered the chief god of the pantheon in different regions of Egypt, it is not clear which “nearly almighty god” is intended. As for the Iranians, since Zoroastrianism attributes adversity to Ahriman rather than the creator of the world, Ahuramazda, they should also not be considered “people of an almighty god” (68). The author’s concept of a “people of a nearly almighty god” seems a strained effort to apply his definition of a “people of an almighty god” to religions where it does not seem to be a useful tool of analysis.

The rest of the book (chapters four through fifteen) is primarily devoted to the history of Israel and Babylon. This section covers the history of Israel from the 8th to 3rd centuries BCE and Babylon from the 8th to 4th centuries BCE. Major historical events are treated such as the destruction of Judah by the Neo-Babylonian empire and the rise of the dynasty founded by Nabopolassar (626-605). The author reviews major events that affected both the peoples of Judah and Babylon, such as the ascendancy of the Persian Empire (6th century BCE), the conquests of Alexander the Great (4th century BCE), and the formation of the Seleucid Empire (3rd century BCE). He also discusses the Iranian reaction to Alexander and the Seleucids, and the impact of the reigns of the Seleucid kings Antiochus IV and V upon Judah. His final chapter is a brief treatment of Judas Maccabaeus.

The major strength of this book is its comparative approach to major events in the history of Israel. By adopting a regional perspective, the author examines how figures such as Cyrus or Alexander the Great had a major impact on not only the Jews, but other peoples of the near East as well. This provides a broader understanding of major events in the history of Israel, and for this the author is to be commended. It is genuinely interesting to read, for example, how Jews and Babylonians alike suffered during the wars over Alexander’s empire following his death (363-70). The author’s comparative historiography exhibits his familiarity with a range of topics, such as the Hellenistic history of both Babylon and Judea.

While one can learn much from this book, it has shortcomings. At times the author’s interpretations of texts are idiosyncratic and unpersuasive. A good case in point

is his understanding of the book of Daniel. He argues that Daniel 2-7 “is based upon Babylonian originals with surprisingly few alterations” (205). One argument for this is that the Babylonian names Shadrach and Meshach that are given to Daniel’s friends preserve remnants of the name Marduk, since they contain some of the letters that are also found in the word Marduk (207). He speculates that Belteshazzar, Daniel’s court name (1:7), was the character’s original name, and that the name Daniel reflects the text’s Jewish appropriation (227). He claims that much of Daniel 2-7 was originally written by priests of Marduk in response to the claims of Deutero-Isaiah that Cyrus was a servant of the God of Israel. Goldstein also argues that there was an original Babylonian “Five-King Version” of Daniel 2 and that the vision of the four beasts of Daniel 7 had three beasts in a Babylonian version that was written in the early 5th century BCE (243). This understanding of Daniel seems highly speculative. While scholars acknowledge that Daniel 1-6 has affinities with Babylonian literature (see, for example, John J. Collins and Peter W. Flint, ed., *The Book of Daniel: Composition and Reception* [Brill: Leiden, 2001]), few would claim that an exilic era Babylonian prototype could be reconstructed from it. As for Daniel 7, there is a broad consensus that it was composed in the Maccabean period. While the unity of this chapter is a long-standing topic of scholarly debate, there is no compelling reason to allocate the majority of it to a Babylonian original.

One other problem with this book involves its use of the phrase “people of an almighty god.” It is certainly worthwhile to compare the religions of Israel and Babylon. Goldstein explores a fruitful avenue of research. But he chooses to focus only on features of these religions that suit his definition of “peoples of an almighty god.” He writes “In this study I aim to present, not all aspects of the history and literature of the Jews and Babylonians and similar groups, but only those which arose from the fact that such nations were *peoples of an almighty god* [his emphasis] according to my definition” (6). This decision imposes a perspective onto the material, making it difficult for the author to assess the significant differences between veneration of Yahweh and Marduk. Concepts such as covenant and a chosen people that are crucial for assessing Israel’s “almighty god” are not treated in any significant way, presumably because there are no analogous features of Babylonian religion. The term also makes it difficult to interpret the fact that each of the different peoples he examines venerates several different deities. While the author acknowledges this variety (5), his concept of a “people of an almighty god” can not adequately address this. The utility of his definition of such a people is also questioned by the fact that he does not use this term in large portions of his book. For example, the phrase is never used in chapters eleven through fourteen, which total approximately 150 pages. Despite these issues, this is a book with original ideas from which one can learn a great deal.