

Human Agency in the Hittite Religion

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Can you control the universe? Maybe in your wildest dreams you thought you could, but if you lived in Hittite society, you might feel more optimistic about answering in the affirmative. More than our currently prevailing religions and philosophies, the Hittites' religion emphasized the power of the individual human. For the Hittites, human agency could literally be cosmic.

Unlike the Abrahamic God, for example, Hittite gods were more accessible, had identifiable flaws, were expected to follow a code of conduct, and could be communicated with and even corrected by humans. While the Abrahamic God is portrayed as infallible, the Hittite gods are frequently shown to have human characteristics and thus human vulnerabilities or weaknesses. One myth even mentions that gods are "Humans and gods were dying of hunger... [The gods] ate but could not get enough. They drank but could not quench their thirst" (Bryce, 2002, 212). Here humans and gods are *both* suffering the same thing. Moreover, by making the Hittite gods dependent upon such tangible bodily needs like eating food, the Hittites not only draw an important human connection between themselves and their gods, they also exert a certain level of control over the gods. If the Hittites did not sacrifice to the gods, the gods would suffer. This is made evident by Mursili's angry prayer to the Sun-Godess Arinna: "O gods, What is this that you have done? You have allowed a plague into Hatti, and the whole of Hatti is dying. No one prepares for you the offering bread and the libation anymore. The plowmen who used to work the fallow fields of the gods have died, so they do not work or reap the fields of the gods. The grinding women who used to make the offering bread for the gods have died, so they do not [make] the god's offering bread any longer" (Singer, 2002, 52). Here Mursili asserts humanity's indispensability to the gods. Even if gods have absolutely more power, gods still require humans to survive, and would suffer without them. Thus humans have a baseline power in the relationship.

In addition to being susceptible to physical weakness, the Hittite gods are also susceptible to having their decisions overruled by other gods. While in the Abrahamic religions, one God has all the decision-making power, Hittites literally had thousands of gods, which meant a more equal distribution of power, and by extension a system of checks and balances. If Judaism was an absolute monarchy, the Hittite gods would be more like president and congress. This makes it so that no god can arbitrarily act in a way that other gods do not find desirable. For instance, when Telipinu disappears, a coalition of gods including Hannahanna and Kamrusepa work together to find him and bring him back (Hoffner, insert). Another example occurs in the Hittite version of Gilgamesh. In this myth, despite his tremendous power, the Sun God has to concede the death of Enkidu to Enlil (Beckman, 2001, 163). Compromise is expected, no matter the level of power.

An important consequence of this more democratic administration is that as a human, if you do not agree with one god's course of action, you can potentially petition another god to be on your side, or contest the god's actions. This happens quite a number of times in the Hittite prayers. In one such prayer, Kantuzzili, a Hittite prince, communicates his side of the story to the Sun God, then implores the Sun God to appease on his behalf the god that Kantuzzili had offended (Singer, 2002, 31-33). In another prayer, Mursili accuses the gods of having falsely listened to the evil words of Tawananna: "[Since] you listened to her] once before, [will you] now [...] the same, O gods, my lords? [Will you hear] the word of evil?" (Singer, 2002, 78). The idea that a god could be deceived by a human such as Tawannanna indicates that gods can make the wrong decision, and when they do, must be called out on it. This suggests that like humans, gods must also abide by a certain, fair and moral standard of behavior.

Not only should gods be called out when they do not uphold a fair standard of behavior, they are also expected to respond to fair inquiry. In fact, the Hittites made sure to leave many

lines of communication open between themselves and the gods, including oracles, rituals, prayers, festivals, dreams, and so on. The way the Hittites went about this communication further suggests that they expected a response back. In fact, the “favorable” vs “unfavorable” oracular framework made it impossible for the gods *not* to respond. For every question, the answer had to be either favorable or unfavorable – so by default, the question had to be answered by the gods. This expectation of response differs greatly from our modern conception of it; people fall out of religion today often because God does not answer their prayers in return. The Hittite gods, in contrast, had no choice but to respond with a “yes” or “no” in the oracles.

Hittites’ ability to question the gods’ actions and their expectation of reciprocal communication implies that inquiry was an accepted and important way of understanding and even attempting to control elements of the universe. This suggests that the core tenets of inquiry, such as logic, experimentation, and testing were central to Hittite intellectual philosophy. The emphasis on the power of human, as opposed to divine, reasoning aligns the Hittite religion more with science than with faith-based religion. In Christianity, for instance, when Job asks God why God does what he does, God shuts him down: “Shall a faultfinder contend with the Almighty? He who argues with God, let him answer it” (Job 40:2). While questioning is not necessarily discouraged in Christianity, the general response to it seems to be one of “God knows best, and you cannot understand Him because you are a human and He is God.” This attitude definitely does not seem to be the case with the Hittites. The Hittite opinion is especially noticeable when examining the myths of the Storm God (Hoffner, 1998, 11-14). In each of these myths, the Storm God wins his battles not through natural ability, but through collusion and cunning. Contrast this with the Christian conception of Satan: “But I am afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds will be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ” (2

Corinthians 11:3). Here, the “craftiness” of Satan is not depicted as strength, but as evil. This failure of human intelligence to correctly interpret the cosmos is emphasized throughout the Bible, and stands in direct contrast to the attitudes of the Hittites, whose major god is shown in the mythology to constantly use wit.

This emphasis on the power of intelligence to understand the cosmos directly manifests in the oracle. Learned priests at the time tried to gain cosmic understanding by testing hypotheses: “favorable” vs “unfavorable” are strikingly similar to the concept of the null and alternative hypothesis used today. When oracles were used, several different types of oracles were often stacked on each other, so as to ensure the validity and reliability of the oracular inquiry (Beal, 2002, 80-81). This is very similar to the testing of scientific theories. Before a theory can come to be accepted in science, the results have to be ascertained using several methods to ensure validity, then replicated several times to ensure replicability.

Given this remarkable similarity to the scientific method, it is no surprise then that some of the Hittites’ religious ideas bore striking resemblances to some of the most important tenets of science: balance. Just as the important scientific Law of Conservation of Energy states that energy cannot be created or destroyed, Hittites believed that evil energy could not be destroyed, but simply transferred from one place to another. This is prevalent through the rituals, examples of which include a “basket of wrath” containing “evil tongues” being buried in a field (Haroutunian, 2003, 159), the chthonic deities being invited to take away the “evil blood” from a house-cleansing ritual (Collins, 1997, 170), the constant invocation of gods to take their plagues elsewhere, and the widespread use of scapegoats to take away evil as well as bread as receptacles for evil. While the Hittites were clearly thinking of evil, not physics or thermodynamics, the fundamental insight behind their logic – the idea of balance, rather than creation or elimination –

predated some of the most fundamental insights of modern science. It also once again stands in contrast to some of the tenets of the Abrahamic religions, which propose that evil is absolutely evil and will one day be triumphed over, eternally, on Judgment Day.

These ideas of balance, and by extension, fairness to all parties, is evident in many Hittite practices which do not focus explicitly on religion. Just as the master-slave relationship between king and god was fair to both parties, the master-slave relationship between ruler and ruled in Hittite society also aimed to be fair to both parties, as laws about slaves suggest (Hoffner, 1995, 217). Just as the Hittite religion is based on a merciful, non-punitive system, Hittite laws aim not to excessively punish the perpetrator, but to compensate the victims of the crime monetarily (Hoffner, 1995, 217-240). Whereas the most important Abrahamic holidays – Lent, Passover, and Ramadan – are based on abstinence, hunger, pain, and suffering, the Hittite festivals we know of seem to be based more upon celebration, drink, food, and a coming together of people of all classes (Singer, 1983, 121-133).

One enormous problem with making these types of conclusions, of course, is that the literature itself was heavily biased towards the elite, whose thoughts were the only ones the scribes could write. This necessarily limits our understanding of Hittite society. However, because the Hittites demonstrate in their religion a belief which so strongly emphasizes the power of the lesser party in a relationship and of individual agency in the face of a greater power, we can at least speculate what the life of a Hittite commoner might be like.

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