

## **Magic, myth and monotheism when reading Genesis 30:37-39**

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### ***ABSTRACT***

*Genesis 30:37-39 may be interpreted in various ways by modern readers, depending on the assumed underlying cosmology (world-view) of the text and how the scientific cosmology of the modern reader interacts with the ancient cosmology. In this process of interpretation the main sources of errors are either that the cosmology of the text is constructed incorrectly (e.g. in the case of Tylor and Frazer's idealistic scheme of religion), or because modern readers may mistakenly assume that the biblical cosmology is identical to their current scientific one. Five different cosmologies (i.e. magical, magico-mythical, monotheistic, deistic and atheistic) are discussed and their assumptions (regarding the mechanisms of the cosmos) applied to elucidate the Genesis 30 text. Finally, it is concluded that the most appropriate cosmology against which Genesis 30:37-39 should be interpreted, is the monotheistic cosmology, while recognising that the magical layer is especially prominent in the immediate context of Genesis 30.*

### **A THE PROBLEM OF RELIGION**

Scholars of religion, including those of the Old Testament, are in the unfortunate position that no generally accepted holistic model exists to deal with religion.<sup>1</sup> It is extraordinary difficult to define religion, and related concepts such as magic<sup>2</sup> and myth,<sup>3</sup> and even the term "monotheism" are onerous concepts.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Stewart E. Guthrie, "Religion: What is it?" *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 35/4 (1996): 412, and Stewart E. Guthrie, "Opportunity, challenge and a definition of religion," *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 1/1 2007, 59-60.

<sup>2</sup> Todd E. Klutz, "Reinterpreting 'magic' in the world of Jewish and Christian scripture: An introduction," in *Magic in the Biblical world* (ed. Todd E. Klutz. London: T & T Clark, 2003), 1-9. Klutz quotes scholars who expressed doubts whether religion is still a useful term.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. John W. Rogerson, *Myth in Old Testament interpretation*, (New York: De Gruyter, 1974).

<sup>4</sup> For example, does the concept "monotheism" include other powerful spiritual beings (e.g. Satan) who can realistically challenge the position of the one true God? Or does it imply that there really is only one omnipotent omniscient God and that no other spiritual being can exist independently or semi-independently from him?

This lack of coherence in religious theory often causes the different aspects of religion (i.e. ritual, belief, magic and myth) to be defined without any clear relationship to each other, and without trying to relate them to the same underlying cosmological assumptions.

The reasons for this disjointed state with regard to religious theory are not always accidental. One of the reasons for this disunity is that postmodern scholars are sceptical about absolute, universal, or objective truths – pointing out that only subjective, personal, and local truths are possible and that different perspectives are often incommensurable.<sup>5</sup> This stance, especially popular in religious studies and the humanities (but with little influence in the natural sciences), unfortunately prevent many scholars from attempting any kind of synthesis, or in constructing more holistic theories regarding religion. Another equally unfortunate consequence of earlier idealistic frameworks is that magic and religion are often seen as two discrete and incompatible phenomena.<sup>6</sup>

The purpose of this article is to challenge the extreme assumptions of postmodernism by suggesting various (partially overlapping) cosmologies. Rather than treating magic and religion as mutually exclusive categories, the possibility will be explored that they may be integrated into a more complex theory of religion, assuming different religious layers within each cosmology,<sup>7</sup> often with fuzzy borders between them. By using Genesis 30:37-39 as an example, the various assumptions regarding the workings (mechanics) of the cosmos (as related to specific cosmologies) will be explored. The reasons for doing this are twofold: firstly, to explain and illustrate the different cosmic mechanics assumed by the various cosmologies and, secondly to show the importance of cosmological assumptions when interpreting Old Testament texts.

## B DEFINING RELIGION

Defining religion<sup>8</sup> is fraught with dangers – the danger of unfounded assumptions and the danger of reading one's own cosmology and preconceptions into

<sup>5</sup> Cf. the following sources regarding the assumptions and/or criticism of post-modernistic scholars: Thomas S. Kuhn, *The structure of scientific revolutions* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1962); Walter Brueggemann, *Texts under negotiation. The Bible and postmodern imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993); Peet J. Van Dyk, "A fuzzy interpretation of the Bible. Going beyond modernism and postmodernism," *Religion & Theology* 9, 2002, 163-182.

<sup>6</sup> E.g. Edward B. Tylor, Primitive culture. *Researches into the development of mythology, philosophy, religion, language, art, and custom*. 7th Edition (New York: Brentano's Publishers, 1924); and James G. Frazer, *The golden bough. A study in magic and religion* (London: McMillan, 1957)

<sup>7</sup> See Section C below for a definition of the term "cosmology."

<sup>8</sup> It is beyond the scope of this article to offer a final definition of religion or discuss the problems associated with any kind of definition. E.g. see Guthrie, "Religion: What

the ancient texts. According to Guthrie an acceptable definition of religion should be both nominal and substantive.<sup>9</sup> This implies that it should not pretend to be real (avoid the essentialist fallacy) and be substantive in the sense that they group actual phenomena. Such a definition should further clarify the most basic assumptions of religion and explain as much as possible of different religious concepts such as magic, myth, ritual and beliefs.

One of the most influential views of religion versus magic is associated with the two British scholars Edward B. Tylor<sup>10</sup> and James G. Frazer,<sup>11</sup> who described the relationship between magic, religion and science in terms of an idealistic and evolutionary scheme. Consistent with their idealistic scheme, Tylor defined religion as: “*the belief in spiritual beings.*”<sup>12</sup>

More recently the philosopher Daniel C. Dennett has proposed a similar working definition of religion, while acknowledging that no clear border can be drawn between religion and related phenomena such as spirituality, wicca (witchcraft) and some New Age movements. He defined religion as: “*Social systems whose participants avow belief in a supernatural agent or agents whose approval is to be sought.*”<sup>13</sup>

On the surface, these definitions may seem plausible, but inherent in them are the following problems: (1) If the terms “spiritual beings” and “supernatural agent” refer to *personal* supernatural beings (i.e. supernatural or non-physical spirits or gods), the definitions go a long way in explaining most religions, but they would exclude more non-theistic and atypical versions of Buddhism and some other religions where supernatural forces are perceived more as impersonal powers rather than personal beings.<sup>14</sup> (2) The definitions

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is it?” 412-413, for a discussion regarding the problems of monothetic versus polythetic definitions.

<sup>9</sup> Guthrie, “Opportunity, Challenge and Definition,” 59.

<sup>10</sup> Tylor, *Primitive culture*.

<sup>11</sup> Frazer, *Golden Bough*.

<sup>12</sup> Tylor, *Primitive culture*, 424.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the spell. Religion as a natural phenomenon* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 8-9.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Barbara O’Brien, “Atheism and devotion in Buddhism,” n.p. About.com: Buddhism [cited 17 May 2010]. Online: <http://buddhism.about.com/od/basicbuddhistteachings/a/buddhaatheism.htm>.: “If atheism is the absence of belief in gods, then many Buddhists are, indeed, atheists. Buddhism is not about either believing or not believing in God or gods. Rather, the historical Buddha taught that believing in gods was not useful for those seeking to realise enlightenment. In other words, God is unnecessary in Buddhism. For this reason, Buddhism is more accurately called nontheistic than atheistic.” However, Guthrie, “Opportunity, Challenge and Religion,” 62, challenges the view made popular by Durkheim (that

imply an absolute distinction between magic (the belief in impersonal supernatural forces) and religion (the belief in personal gods). This is indeed what both Tylor<sup>15</sup> and Frazer<sup>16</sup> assumed by their idealistic scheme, which proposed a development from a more “primitive” belief in magic, to “higher” forms of religion, and eventually the development of science as its highest outcome.<sup>17</sup> This idealistic scheme relegated magic to a primitive thought pattern and viewed it as the “disreputable cousin” of religion – a view rejected by most contemporary scholars of religion.<sup>18</sup> In contrast to the “three course meal” model of religion, advocated by Tylor and Frazer (where each stage or course is presented as discrete moments in time and different from the previous one) most modern scholars support a “sandwich” model of religion, with different layers of magic, animism and monotheism, which may coexist within the same “meal” (i.e. religion). (3) Tylor’s definition also does not clarify the relationship between belief and practice. It thereby may suggest that religion is only a set of beliefs (i.e. the same as a theory or philosophy) and that it does not *necessarily* involve any expression of these beliefs through rituals, acts of worship and/or lifestyle. This important link in religion between beliefs and practice was correctly emphasised by Mircea Eliade when he stated:

The theory that these rites imply comes down to this: nothing can endure if it is not “animated,” if it is not, through sacrifice, endowed with a “soul” ...<sup>19</sup>

To address the above problems we would like to propose the following working definition of religion that is more inclusive and a less ideologically determined:

Religion is the belief in the existence of a supernatural and non-physical reality, which is linked in such a way to our physical reality

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Buddhism is a religion without gods) by stating that all popular forms of Buddhism believe in gods, while only atypical philosophical strains do not believe in gods.

<sup>15</sup> Tylor, *Primitive culture*, 26-69.

<sup>16</sup> Frazer, *Golden bough*, 63-65.

<sup>17</sup> Hans-Günter Heimbrock, “Magie, Alltagsreligion und die Heilkraft des Glaubens. Etappen und Probleme theologischer und kulturwissenschaftlicher Magiediskussion,” in *Magie. Katastrophengesellschaft und Kritik des Glaubens* (eds. Hans-Günther Heimbrock and Heinz Streib, Kok Pharos Kampen: 1994), 23. “In den Spuren von E.B. Tylor und Frazers historischen Periodisierung galt es ferner für ausgemacht, daß magisches Denken und Handeln mit der Eigenart früher, “primitiver” Kulturen identisch sei, daß dem in der Entwicklung der Menschheit die Epoche der Religion, schließlich als Krone die der Wissenschaft folgen.”

<sup>18</sup> Geraldine Pinch, *Magic in ancient Egypt* (London: British Museum Press, 1994), 12.

<sup>19</sup> Mircea Eliade, “Ritual and myth,” in *Readings in ritual studies* (ed. Ronald L. Grimes, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1996 [1949]), 197.

that it can influence or exert power on it. Religion is different from philosophy in that it demands expression through various acts of worship and ritual, which are perceived as ways of influencing the supernatural.<sup>20</sup>

Our definition of religion deliberately includes both the belief in magic (and all other beliefs in impersonal supernatural forces) as well as the belief in spirits and personal gods. It does not assume that all religions focus on an afterlife, but only that non-physical or supernatural forces may influence, or are linked to our natural life.

It should further be emphasised that the clear distinction between natural and supernatural forces or powers, although necessary for defining religion, is largely a modern (post-Enlightenment) one. Such a distinction depends on the clear demarcation of what constitutes natural forces, which only became possible once science was developed in modern times.<sup>21</sup> One should therefore not expect any clear distinction between supernatural versus natural forces in ancient or pre-scientific thought, because the exact limits of natural forces and how they functioned, were not yet known.<sup>22</sup>

At the most, one could assume that some kind of distinction between ordinary and extraordinary events was made by pre-scientific communities. Although both ordinary and extraordinary effects could be attributed to the supernatural, the extraordinary were much more commonly linked to the supernatural than the ordinary. For example, both ordinary meteorological events (e.g. seasonal rains) and an extraordinary storm, changing the course of a critical

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<sup>20</sup> The definition includes the problematic terms “supernatural” and “non-physical.” Cf. Guthrie, “Religion: What is it?” 413-415, prefers the term “humanlike but non-human” to refer to supernatural agents. The term “supernatural” is, however, preferred, because the term “humanlike, but non-human” is really so vague that it can include a statue of a human! The term “non-physical” should also be preferred to the term “immaterial” because a physical phenomenon such as energy is also immaterial. Also see Guthrie, “Opportunity, challenge and religion,” 61.

<sup>21</sup> It should of course be recognised that although the scientific method was only developed during the Renaissance, many major steps towards a rational and empirical approach were already taken by the philosophers of classical Greece. It should therefore not be surprising that the first attempts to distinguish between natural and supernatural causes and the insistence that history and nature should primarily be understood and described in terms of these natural causes, came from the Ancient Greeks. In this they differed not only from the traditional cosmology of Ancient Greece (e.g. as reflected by Homer), but also from those of the Ancient Near East and the entire ancient world.

<sup>22</sup> It should therefore NOT be surprising that many non-Western cultures (e.g. Japanese or traditional communities) do not have a term for religion. Cf. Guthrie, “Opportunity, challenge and religion,” 60.

battle, could be attributed to the gods. However, *extraordinary* effects would be much more spectacular and hence would be more readily attributed to the direct intervention of the gods. In a sense, one could say that *ordinary* cosmic events were perceived as being on “autopilot,” whilst *extraordinary* events (miracles or magical events) were seen as being caused by the direct influence of the supernatural.

Given the above working definition for religion, it is now possible to explore the way religion and cosmology (worldview) may relate and define each other.

## C DEFINING COSMOLOGY

The term “cosmology” is sometimes used to refer to the physical universe only. For our purpose a more useful definition is the following:

Cosmology is the branch of philosophy dealing with the origin and general structure of the universe, with its parts, elements, and laws, and especially with such of its characteristics as space, time, *causality*, and freedom (emphasis mine - PJvD).<sup>23</sup>

Although this definition specifically links the term cosmology to a branch of philosophy, one can also see it in more general terms as a worldview (or overarching perspective) from which a person or group interprets the workings (mechanics) of the universe. Although the assumptions of a cosmology are perceived as true (by those who believe in it) these assumptions may in fact be true, partially true or entirely false.

While exploring various cosmologies we will focus primarily on the way these cosmologies suggested that the universe was structured and how it functioned (i.e. the mechanics or causality within the universe). As can be appreciated, a cosmology may be entirely secular (i.e. without any supernatural assumptions), such as the current scientific “big bang” cosmology,<sup>24</sup> or it may be closely linked to religious assumptions – as was the case with most pre-Enlightenment cosmologies (with the exception of some classical Greek philosophers).<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Anonymous. “Cosmology,” n.p. Dictionary.com [cited 17 May 2010]. Online: <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/cosmology>.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. Stephen W. Hawking, *A brief history of time. From the big bang to black holes* (Toronto: Bantam, 1988).

<sup>25</sup> Strato of Lampsacus (who became the third director of the Lyceum after Aristotle in 287 B.C.) is sometimes regarded as the first atheist (although some say it was Diagoras of Melos, 5th century B.C.). According to Jonathan I. Israel, *Enlightenment contested: Philosophy, modernity, and the emancipation of man, 1670-1752* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006) this is probably an overstatement, although Strato, in

Although a progression from more simple to more complex cosmologies is recognisable, it should not be assumed that these cosmologies neatly replaced each other or are mutually exclusive. Cosmologies may overlap or may be layered. The reasons for saying this are, threefold:

Two (or more) cosmologies may exist simultaneously within the same society or era. For example, in classical Greece some philosophers may have believed in a different, more secular cosmology in contrast to that of most of the population.<sup>26</sup>

An idealistic philosophy of history, where belief systems (cosmologies) neatly follow on each other, is often problematic, and more in the mind of the scholar than supported by the facts. History is much more complex than this, as is illustrated, for example, by the rise and fall in the popularity of the belief in magic.<sup>27</sup>

Cosmologies were not always rational or consistent – in contrast to the demands of a modern scientific cosmology. What we (as modern readers) would assume to be mutually exclusive categories of belief, would often be explained in religion in non-rational terms and may exist simultaneously within the same cosmology. For example, the co-existence of beliefs in impersonal and personal supernatural forces may seem illogic to us, but in Egyptian religion these beliefs happily coexisted.<sup>28</sup>

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the Aristotelian vein, tried to explain nature only in terms of natural causes. In a sense, one could view many of the works of the classical Greek philosophers as an increasing secularisation of the cosmos.

<sup>26</sup> It is also well recognised that magic persists even in so-called higher religions and modern scientific societies. Cf. Heimbrock, *Magic*, 8.

<sup>27</sup> Rather than being replaced by religion, the belief in magic goes through cycles of popularity: It experienced a decline in popularity among the educated classes of classical Greece. During the Middle Ages the belief in magic was extremely common in Western Europe. (One just has to consider the many witches who were burnt during this period for practicing black magic and look at the many magical features adorning Medieval cathedrals for the purpose of warding off evil, to appreciate this fact.) Also see Heimbrock, *Magic*, 20. During the Enlightenment the belief in magic again became extremely unpopular with such beliefs being termed superstitious nonsense. Currently a renewed interest, and in some cases, a belief in magic has become evident as suggested by the popularity of the Lord of the Rings and the Harry Potter books. See D. Pezzoli-Olgiaatti, “From *mageia* to magic: Envisaging a problematic concept in the study of religion,” in *A kind of magic* (eds. Michael Labahn and Bert Jan L. Peerbolte, London: T & T Clark, 2007), 3, and the success of neo-paganist books such as those by Paulo Coelho (e.g. Paulo Coelho, *Brida*, [London: Harper Collins, 2008]).

<sup>28</sup> Pinch, *Magic in ancient Egypt*.

## D READING GENESIS 30:37-39

To illustrate how different cosmologies may impact on our interpretation of a specific biblical text, Genesis 30:37-39 will be used as an example.<sup>29</sup> The reason why this passage was chosen is because it is sufficiently vague about its underlying cosmological assumptions – probably because the author assumed that these would be well-known and shared by his first readers.<sup>30</sup>

In Genesis 30 we read about the curious incident where Jacob somehow manipulates the colouring of the offspring from Laban's flocks. In Genesis 30:31-32 Jacob agrees with Laban (his father-in-law) that he would work for him, if Laban gives him all the streaked or speckled or spotted offspring of his flocks. In the quoted verses below, he then ensures that he would get more than his random share by resorting to some strange measures:

<sup>37</sup> Jacob, however, took fresh-cut branches from poplar, almond and plane trees and made white stripes on them by peeling the bark and exposing the white inner wood of the branches. <sup>38</sup> Then he placed the peeled branches in all the watering troughs, so that they would be directly in front of the flocks when they came to drink. When the flocks were in heat and came to drink, <sup>39</sup> they mated in front of the branches. And they bore young that were streaked or speckled or spotted. (NIV)

Although there may be differences in the interpretation of some of its lesser details, chapter 30 makes it clear that:

- Jacob peeled branches (rods) in such a way that they would have streaked or speckled or spotted patterns on them.
- He then placed these rods in front of the flocks and in the watering troughs, so that they would come into close proximity to them when coming to drink and mate.
- In some unexplained way the streaked or speckled or spotted branches caused offspring with *similar* looking patterns.

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<sup>29</sup> It should be stressed that it is beyond the purpose of this article to offer detailed exegesis of Genesis 30:37-39. The text is merely used as an example to illustrate how cosmology may impact on interpretation and not to offer a final interpretation of the text.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. John Miles Foley, "Word-power, performance, and tradition," *American Journal of Folklore* 105 (1992): 275-301. Foley extended the oral-formulaic theory of Parry and Lord to include the aspect of assumed knowledge in traditional folklore and the task of the audience to "complete" pregnant words and ideas.

The text does not mention any kind of intervention by God, or explain exactly how the peeled rods may have caused such *extraordinary* results. This leaves the readers to construct the meaning of the text by using the assumed cosmology and its associated system of causes and effects. Depending on how we construct this assumed cosmology, one may interpret the text in totally different ways, as will be illustrated in the next part where various cosmologies and their preconceptions regarding the mechanisms of the universe, will be explored with reference to the Genesis 30 text.

## E A MAGICAL COSMOLOGY

A magical<sup>31</sup> cosmology assumes that impersonal supernatural forces could influence natural outcomes, or may be manipulated to cause such magical effects. Although we wish to distinguish between a magical and a magico-mythical cosmology (see next point), it should be emphasised that one cannot be sure if the belief in impersonal supernatural forces ever existed independently in history, without the concurrent belief in spirits (i.e. personal supernatural forces).<sup>32</sup>

However, for the purpose of clarity we will deal with the belief in magic as a separate cosmology, without wishing to imply *necessarily* that it ever existed as a separate belief system during the history of humankind. Our distinction between different cosmologies further does not wish to advocate a clear and precise separation between mutually exclusive categories, but rather propose overlapping, multilayered cosmologies with fuzzy borders between them.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> The terms “magic” and “magical” are here used in the technical sense of referring to supernatural forces or powers, and not in the popular secular sense of referring to something extraordinary, delightful, or creative.

<sup>32</sup> Although Frazer, *Golden Bough*, 63-64, assumes that magic existed independently and before animism (i.e. the belief in spiritual beings), he nonetheless acknowledges that the two beliefs sometimes co-exist in extraordinary circumstances: “In some cases of magic ... the operation of spirits is assumed, and ... an attempt is made to win their favour by prayer and sacrifice. But these cases are on the whole exceptional; they exhibit magic tinged and alloyed with religion. Wherever sympathetic magic occurs in its unadulterated form, it assumes that in nature one event follows another necessarily and invariably without the intervention of any spiritual or personal agency. Thus its fundamental conception is identical with that of modern science ...” However, this view of Frazer depends on an idealistic framework where ideal and “pure” beliefs existed independently from one another. This idealistic scheme is rejected by most contemporary scholars of religion, who recognise that mixed forms of magic and religion exist much more commonly than recognised by Frazer and earlier scholars.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Van Dyk, “Fuzzy interpretation,” 163-182.

## 1 How magic works

In a magical cosmology it is assumed that the mechanics of the universe inter alia operate according to the logic of sympathetic magic, which recognises two processes by which objects or causes and effects can be linked:

- Through a process of *similarity* or *homeopathy* things that look similar are linked, because it is assumed that causes and effects resemble each other. For example, an image (imitating a god) has the magical effect of bringing the god into the immediate and real presence of the person, who is worshipping in front of it. The image itself is therefore regarded as sacred, because of its magical linkage with the real god.<sup>34</sup>
- Through a process of *contagion* objects can become magically linked to the supernatural or be endowed with such powers. For example, in voodoo magic a doll is constructed, containing hairs, nail clippings or a piece of clothing from an adversary. In this way the doll is “infected” with the “soul” or “spirit” of the adversary and thereby becomes magically linked to that person. The adversary can then be hurt (or even be killed) by hurting the voodoo doll (e.g. by sticking a pin through the heart of the doll). Another example of the law of contagion is when a god reveals itself at a specific place (e.g. temple, forest, town), or through an object (e.g. a stone). It is then assumed that this link somehow becomes permanent.<sup>35</sup>

Homeopathic and contagious magic often act simultaneously, for example, in the case where an image of the god also becomes the place where the god reveals him/herself, thus involving both the principles of similarity and contagion.

The above processes, causing the magical linkage of objects with supernatural powers, further assume that such impersonal forces do not mysteriously and suddenly cause extraordinary effects, but that a physical *instrument* acts as an intermediary in the magical process. That is, magical forces (or non-physical powers) act through physical means to ensure a magical effect or result. These physical instruments of magic can be objects (e.g. rods/wands, amulets, stones, trees, images, etc.), medicine/herbs,<sup>36</sup> rituals, words (e.g. a spell, curse or bles-

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Frazer, *Golden Bough*, 14-49, for a detailed discussion of the logic of homeopathic magic and the maxim that like produces like. Also see Peet J. Van Dyk, “Mythical linkage and mythical frameworks,” *OTE* 18/1 (2005): 863-878, for a general discussion of magical (or mythical) linkage.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Frazer, *Golden Bough*, 49-59.

<sup>36</sup> It is a mistaken modern assumption to attribute mere natural and chemical properties to traditional herbs. Within a magical cosmology the effectiveness of herbs are always in the first place linked to their magical effects, rather than their natural ef-

sing), or a sacred place (e.g. a temple or forest). Instruments of magic are not seen as optional, but are always *obligatory* in effecting a magical result. It is the instrument of magic (e.g. a magical wand) which is perceived as the direct cause of the magical effect. Without the instrument (endowed with magical powers) there will be no magical effect.<sup>37</sup> For example, it would not be sufficient for a person to merely wish or ask the waters of the sea to part, he will have to use some kind of magical instrument (e.g. a rod, a magical spell – which is different from merely asking – and/or perform a ritual), before the waters would open before him.<sup>38</sup> Instruments of magic are usually regarded as *sacred*, because their magical powers separate them from the ordinary or profane and link them to the supernatural or divine.<sup>39</sup>

Associated with the obligatory nature of magical instruments is the imperative of precision: Magic is an art of *absolute precision*. Precise knowledge and performance are required, or the magic will not be effective. A ritual needs to be performed according to a prescribed norm; a spell must be uttered in exactly the right way, with the precise words and the correct order of words.<sup>40</sup>

Access to instruments of magic and knowledge of how to manipulate them were usually restricted by societies in various ways (e.g. through secrecy) to avoid misuse of them. Although some forms of common magic require only a rudimentary knowledge of magical practices, powerful magic can only be performed by an “official” with special knowledge (wisdom) and power. This special functionary is usually either an extraordinary person (e.g. one of the founding ancestors of a nation), or in the case of a more organised cult will belong to a professional class (e.g. be a professional magician, shaman or priest). As such, the functionary would have special knowledge (often regarded as secret and/or sacred) and special powers and would know how to perform

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fects. Cf. David Hammond-Tooke, *Rituals and medicines: Indigenous Healing in South Africa* (Johannesburg: A.D. Donker, 1989).

<sup>37</sup> This is analogous to how natural causes and effects are perceived: If the natural physical cause is absent, there will also be no natural effect. For example, a stone will not fly through the air if it was not actually thrown by an arm (the natural instrument or cause).

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Exodus 14 where Aaron used his rod as a magical instrument to part the waters of the Sea of Reeds.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Mircea Eliade, *Das Heilige und das Profane* (Hamburg: Rowohlt Hamburg, 1957).

<sup>40</sup> The imperative of precision explains why archaic words often persist in spells. Magic demands that the correct word be used. An unknown word cannot merely be exchanged with a more common one. For the same reason magic can only be accomplished by using the correct name of a person (e.g. when cursing him or her). Similarly, the help of a god can only be invoked if its correct personal name is known and used.

certain purifying rituals to protect him or her against the dangerous powers of magic.

In conclusion one should stress the point that magical causes and effects were seen as just as *real* as any physical cause and effect. Magical objects, words or rituals are therefore definitely not symbolic in nature. Contrary to the modern symbolic interpretation of magic, attributing symbolic effects mostly to the placebo or psychological effects, the ancients and members of many traditional societies regard magical effects as real and firmly believe in the powerful and real results that could be achieved by invoking magic. The real (rather than symbolic) nature of magic is *inter alia* illustrated by the fact that ancient and traditional people fear black magic and think that they could *physically* be hurt by the effects of spells, curses or the evil eye. Magical objects, words and rituals should therefore be sharply contrasted with mere symbolic interpretations.<sup>41</sup>

Magical cause and effects are not only real, but as implied, they are also immediate, independent and automatic, that is, without the interference or influence of personal supernatural beings. In this sense they are perceived as similar to natural causes and effects.<sup>42</sup> Being perceived as immediate and automatic in their effects, magical forces could be termed impersonal rather than personal, although this distinction would not have been made in any precise or consistent way in pre-scientific cultures.

From the above discussion we can extract the following *criteria* for identifying magical assumptions within an ancient text, such as the Old Testament:

- Certain linkage processes, in accordance with the logic of *sympathetic magic* (homeopathy and/or contagion) are described in the text.
- *Instruments* of magic are being used, implying that they are *obligatory* in causing the desired effect.
- The imperative of *precision*. That is, a specific object, words or rituals are being used to cause a result.
- Special *functionaries* perform the magic.
- Magic causes *real* (physical and observable) effects.

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<sup>41</sup> Symbolic acts or ceremonies are never regarded as real. The differences between magical and symbolic interpretation deserve a thorough and separate exploration.

<sup>42</sup> The fact that magical causes and effects as well as natural causes and effects were perceived by the ancients and pre-scientific communities as real, impersonal and hence automatic, is a further indication that no clear-cut distinction between them could be made prior to the development of the scientific method.

- Magical forces are *automatic* and impersonal (i.e. without the intercession of God).

## 2 Reading Genesis 30 within a magical cosmology

When Genesis 30:37-39 is interpreted according to the assumptions of a magical cosmology, one would come to the following conclusions:

- The rods, used by Jacob, are typical of magical instruments, deliberately constructed according to the law of similarity. Jacob established a magical link between the peeled rods (instruments of magic) and the offspring of the flocks, by using homeopathy: The fact that the flocks mated in the vicinity of the peeled rods, produced the magical effect of causing the lambs also to be born with stripes, speckles and spots.
- Instruments of magic were used: Jacob used magical rods to achieve extraordinary results. The obligatory nature of these instruments of magic is implied by the fact that Jacob did not merely ask some supernatural power to cause the desired effect, but had to construct special instruments that he could use to cause the effect.
- Precision in the way the rods were used, is implied by the fact that Jacob had to put these rods in front of the flocks, and even within the drinking troughs. Merely peeling the rods would not suffice, he also had to put them in a specific location for them to have an effect.
- Although Jacob was not an official cult functionary, he held a special position as one of the founding fathers of the Israelites, living in a time before the cult was formally organised. He was therefore (like Abraham and Isaac) regarded as a special case and could assume the duties of a priest by offering sacrifices and by performing other sacred rites.<sup>43</sup>
- The act of placing the rods in front of the flocks had a *real* physical effect, as would be the case if it was caused by natural causes. The effects were not imaginary or caused by a placebo effect.
- In the context of Genesis 30, no mention is made of God or of any other personal force causing the birth of more streaked or speckled or spotted offspring. The effect was immediate and apparently independent from the influence of God. To therefore interpret the incident as God causing the miraculous effect, may be congruent with the larger context of the Old Testament (see later), but is not supported by the immediate context of the text. This may suggest a belief in magic and the effect impersonal forces may have within the cosmos.

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<sup>43</sup> Cf. Genesis 31:54; 46:1-4.

## F A MAGICO-MYTHICAL COSMOLOGY

As suggested by the name, a magico-mythical cosmology is more complex than a magical one in that it adds an *animistic* (i.e. mythical) layer to the existing magical one. The term “animism” was popularised by Tylor and refers to the belief in personal supernatural beings (spirits or gods).<sup>44</sup> Because myths have often been closely linked by scholars to a belief in personal gods (polytheism), we will use the terms “mythical” and “animistic” as more or less interchangeable.<sup>45</sup>

Although this definition of myths is totally inadequate, because it incorrectly restricts myths to polytheistic religions,<sup>46</sup> such a view is nonetheless correct in pointing to the fact that the gods (i.e. personal supernatural forces) always played an important role in most myths. For example, the great mythologies of Greece (i.e. Homer) and those of the Ancient Near East (e.g. the Babylonian *Enuma elish*) are largely about the doings of the gods and how they constantly interfered with the mechanics of the universe. Myths thereby serve the function of affirming the details and explaining the mechanics assumed by a magico-mythical cosmology. Myths do this by answering questions such as: who is the most powerful god in the pantheon and how did this come about? Which forces are operating in the cosmos and how are they ordered (structured) to ensure that chaos is avoided? How do the gods ensure fertility?

### 1 Relationship between magical and animistic forces

Within a magico-mythical/animistic cosmology (or mythology) impersonal automatic forces (both natural and supernatural) are either assumed or explicitly linked to the passive or active intervention of the gods. This view implies that the magical and animistic layers are not necessarily mutually exclusive (as assumed when posing them as two alternative systems), but that they can happily co-exist within the same cosmology.<sup>47</sup> This begs the question of how the relationship between impersonal and personal forces may have been seen

<sup>44</sup> Tylor, *Primitive culture*, 425; “I propose here, under the name of Animism, to investigate the deep-lying doctrine of Spiritual Beings, which embodies the very essence of Spiritualistic as opposed to Materialistic philosophy. Animism is not a new technical term, though now seldom used.” In contrast to Tylor, 426 we will not restrict religion to the animistic layer, but view it as a broader concept, including both the magical and animistic layers and acknowledging that within a magico-mythical cosmology the two layers often (if not always) co-exist.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis*. 9. Auflage, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1977), who defined myths as “Göttergeschichte”.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Rogerson, *Myth in OT interpretation*, for a more complete discussion about various possible definitions of myths.

<sup>47</sup> One can rightly ask why one can assume the existence of impersonal natural forces, while categorically excluding the existence of impersonal supernatural forces?

within a magico-mythical cosmology. The following *three models* can be suggested:

- The *hands-on model* assumes that all impersonal forces (either natural or supernatural) are constantly supervised and facilitated by the gods. Nothing happens without the knowledge and intervention of the gods.<sup>48</sup> For example, if it rains, this fact is not perceived as an independent and natural meteorological process, but as being deliberately caused by the gods who opened the heavenly sluice gates. To what extent such a hands-on model can consistently be maintained in practice by believers may be a debatable point: Although it is easy to confess in *theory* that absolutely nothing happens without the intervention of the gods, it is much more difficult to consistently maintain in *practice* that even the smallest effect is caused by the supernatural.<sup>49</sup> The hands-on model is therefore probably more a theoretical than a practical model.
- The *auto-pilot model* assumes that magical (and natural) forces are semi-automatic in nature, but that these impersonal forces can at any time be short-circuited by the will of the gods. The universe is hence on a kind of autopilot system, but with the possibility that the system may be overruled at any stage by the gods, who can switch back to direct control, like a modern aircraft pilot who can overrule an autopilot system. In such a belief-system magical and natural forces would largely retain their automatic nature as in a magical cosmology, with only occasional direct interference from the gods.

In both the hands-on and the autopilot models the gods (or at least the main god) would probably be seen as not being susceptible to the automatic effects of magical forces, but as being above them. How can one override natural or supernatural forces if you are equally susceptible to them? If the gods are not susceptible to magic, it further implies that they do not need to use more pow-

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<sup>48</sup> This implies that the borders between impersonal and personal forces become blurred in such a model.

<sup>49</sup> Although we would like to think that religions and people would always be entirely logic and consistent, this is of course not the case. For example, although many people may theoretically confess a hands-on model, they often are practical supporters of the autopilot or even the atheistic model. How long such cognitive dissonance can be maintained within any religious system, probably depends on how convincingly the rational discrepancies can be explained away by invoking non-rational arguments, for example, that the cosmos and its mechanisms are ultimately a mystery. This resort to mystery has several religious advantages: 1) It preserves piety; 2) It counters the arrogance of rationalists; 3) It can to a large extent maintain a rationalistic philosophy, without becoming reductionist by assuming that rational logic can explain absolutely everything.

erful magic to counter magic, because their own personal powers would be superior to any possible magical forces. It is important to realise that these two models are probably more compatible with a belief in an omnipotent and omniscient god – which was not the case in most polytheistic religions.<sup>50</sup>

- The *limited power* model assumes that impersonal magical forces are independent forces from the gods and may pre-date both the origin of the gods and the creation of the cosmos. This model is probably only consistent with polytheistic religions where even the upper god was not perceived as being entirely omnipotent and omniscient. The model therefore suggests the following:
  - In a limited power model it would be possible for one god to use magic against another god, and for another god to counter such magic by using more powerful magic. The gods are therefore susceptible to the impersonal forces of magic. That is, spells and rituals could be used against them, or could be used by believers to manipulate the gods, for example, by conducting a magical ritual or sacrifice.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> The hands-on model would become more of a proposition when one reckons with one omnipotent and omniscient God as in a monotheistic cosmology (see later). The logical need for a consistent hands-on model is possible, but not absolutely necessary within polytheistic religions, where gods have limited power. To marry polytheism with omniscient/omnipotent gods would logically be difficult. In a pantheon, where power may shift (e.g. when Marduk became the main god in the Babylonian pantheon), no god could logically be omnipotent. When the main god in the pantheon is perceived as omnipotent and omniscient, no one of the other gods could realistically challenge the main god, or cause anything without him/her. If this was the case, the need for other gods, in addition to the head of the pantheon, would cease to exist. If it is accepted that the Ancients were not deficient in their reasoning abilities – versus Wilhelm Wundt, *Elemente der Völkerpsychologie. Grundlinien einer psychologischen Entwicklungsgeschichte der Menschheit* (Leipzig: Kröner, 1912) – but merely lacked modern scientific knowledge, it would become problematic if not impossible to assume a belief in omnipotent and omniscient gods within polytheistic religions.

<sup>51</sup> Many theories exist regarding the perceived effectiveness and necessity of sacrifice. These vary from viewing sacrifices as ensuring the good will of the gods (by showing that you are willing to sacrifice something by giving a gift), or as subtle forms of persuasion, to providing necessities to the gods. However, none of these theories explain the absolute necessity of sacrifice. Why can the worshipper not only say from the bottom of his heart that he or she is sorry about a transgression and be forgiven by the deity? Why the added necessity of actually offering something? Even within Christianity, sacrifice was not entirely abandoned. Christ had to be sacrificed on the cross to ensure salvation (Hebrews 10:11-18). To what extent this necessity of sacrifice should be explained within a magical framework need more investigation.

- In such a belief-system the power and wisdom of the gods would primarily be perceived in terms of their access to, and superior knowledge of magic.
- Such a model would further allow for a shift in the power relations between the gods, for example, where a young “upstart” god takes over the power from the older head of the pantheon.

A quick overview of the mythology of the Ancient Near East shows that it is compatible with the magico-mythical cosmology and more specifically with the limited power model. This is suggested *inter alia* by the following:

- Babylonian, Canaanite and Egyptian religions all reckoned with a pantheon of gods, who were *not* perceived as omnipotent or omniscient.
- Shifts in power between the gods are well recorded in Ancient Near Eastern mythologies. For example, in Ugarit Baal replaced El as the most powerful god,<sup>52</sup> while in Babylon Marduk took over from Anu to become the new king of the gods (*Enuma elish*, Tablets 4, lines 1-15).<sup>53</sup> Similarly in Egyptian religion Osiris took over most of the power and functions from the father god Re.<sup>54</sup>
- Magic played a significant role in the mythologies of the Ancient Near East and the following examples illustrate the belief that the gods were seen as being susceptible to magic and that their ability to use magic was a key factor in assuming a position of power:
- When Marduk requested the other gods to be recognised as the king of the Babylonian pantheon, he was first required by them to demonstrate his power by magically making a garment disappear and then re-appear (*Enuma elish*, Tablet 4, lines 2-30).

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According to Heimbrock, *Magic*, 20-21, it is difficult if not impossible to sometimes distinguish between magic and religion on the grounds of a ritual being seen as a form of request or as a way to force the god.

<sup>52</sup> Anonymous, “Ugaritic Baal and ‘Anat cycle,” n.p. [cited 21 June 2010]. Online: <http://www.uoregon.edu/~dfalk/courses/bible/myth.htm>.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Bratcher, “The Mesopotamian/Babylonian creation myth,” n.p. [cited 15 June 2010]. Online: <http://www.crivoice.org/enumaelish.html>.

<sup>54</sup> Anonymous, “The Abydos triad - Osiris, Isis and Horus - and Seth,” n.p. [cited 21 June 2010]. Online: <http://www.reshafim.org.il/ad/egypt/religion/osiris.htm>.

- When fighting Tiamat, Marduk gathered all his weapons, including a magical spell to help him in subduing the goddess (*Enuma elish*, Tablet 4, line 61).<sup>55</sup>
- In Egyptian mythology the gods not only constantly used magical spells and rituals, but were sometimes even threatened by human priests that magic would be used against them if they do not grant the priests their wishes. This was possible because Heka (magic) is called as primary to all the gods.<sup>56</sup>
- In Egyptian religion certain magical rituals were required to assist the sun god Re in his nightly fight against the crocodile-like monster Apophis while travelling through the underworld. The fact that human priests could aid the most powerful Egyptian god in his battle by using magical rituals, suggests that impersonal magical forces were seen as being more powerful than the power of the gods.<sup>57</sup>
- Isis used magic to enable her to re-assemble the dismembered body of Osiris, after it was cut up by his brother Seth and the 72 other gods who conspired against him.<sup>58</sup>
- In Ugarit El promises Anat to put a magical spell on the other gods to prevent them from harassing her any longer.<sup>59</sup>

From our discussion it became clear that the *limited power* model is compatible with Ancient Near Eastern mythology and also logically makes the most sense in a polytheistic cosmology. It further demonstrated that the magical and animistic layers actually co-existed in Ancient Near Eastern religions and within magico-mythical cosmologies.

## 2 Reading Genesis 30 within a magico-mythical cosmology

When Genesis 30:37-39 is interpreted from the perspective of a magico-mythical cosmology, the text could be read in the following way:

- Jacob used homeopathic magic to cause the desired colouring of the offspring.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Bratcher, “Mesopotamian creation myth,” <http://www.crivoice.org/enumaelish.html>.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Anonymous, “Heka: The magic of Ancient Egypt,” n.p. [cited 21 July 2010]. Online: <http://www.reshafim.org.il/ad/egypt/religion/magic.htm>.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. April McDevitt, “Ancient Egypt: The mythology. Apep (Apophis),” n.p. [cited 21 June 2010]. Online: <http://www.egyptianmyths.net/apep.htm>.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Anonymous, “Abydos triad”.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Anonymous, “Baal-myths - Ugarit Ib'l,” n.p. [cited 21 June 2010]. Online: <http://www.bookrags.com/tandf/baal-mythsugarit-ibl-tf/>.

- God was not involved in the process (as suggested by the fact that He is not mentioned). Magical forces are automatic and independent from the active intervention of God.
- Being susceptible to magical forces himself (see the limited power model above), God would only have been able to change the outcome of the magical manipulation of Jacob if he had used more powerful magic. (However, nothing in the text suggests that the Israelite God was perceived as being limited in power or being susceptible to magical forces.)

## G A MONOTHEISTIC COSMOLOGY

Although many Old Testament scholars have explored the origin and development of monotheism within Israel<sup>60</sup> (and other nations, e.g. in Egypt during the reign of Tutankhamun), the question that interests us here, is how the development of monotheism may have influenced the cosmology of its time. For example, is monotheism compatible with the belief in impersonal and/or the belief in other personal supernatural beings, and how would such beliefs influence the perceptions about the mechanics of the universe?

### 1 Redundancy of other supernatural forces

Within a monotheistic cosmology the concept of one omnipotent (and omniscient) God is assumed, thus making the existence of other powerful gods or impersonal magical forces logically redundant.<sup>61</sup> Why would an omnipotent and omniscient God need “the help” of other beings or forces? However, practice shows that redundant spiritual beings and forces are not only tolerated in monotheistic religions, but may in some cases even thrive, with a myriad of supernatural beings and forces commonly associated with the one God. This is illustrated by the fact that within strict monotheistic religions, such as Judaism,

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<sup>60</sup> Cf. Mark S. Smith, *The origins of biblical monotheism. Israel's polytheistic background and the Ugaritic texts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), for a recent overview.

<sup>61</sup> Although one omnipotent and omniscient God makes other gods redundant, monotheism has the disadvantage of raising the ethical question why such a God would allow evil (called the theodicy problem). This theodicy problem does not exist in polytheistic religions, where gods are not omnipotent and where evil and chaos can be attributed to different gods. To introduce a second evil force of power (e.g. the devil) into a monotheistic cosmology, does not make logically sense and could therefore only be maintained in a dogmatic system where it is explained in terms of mystery or “above-rational” logic (a strategy often employed in religion).

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Islam and Christianity the prominence given to extra spiritual beings and magical forces may range from being almost absent to being extremely prevalent.<sup>62</sup>

This belief in extra spiritual beings and the reality of magical forces should in the first place be seen as a “spill over” from magical and magico-mythical layers of religion, and secondly, as an understandable extension from the general belief in spirits and the immortality of human souls.<sup>63</sup> From such a belief it is but a small step towards also affording some limited role to such spirits. The following explanations are commonly given for the existence and role of such extra supernatural beings and forces within monotheism:

- Although God is omnipotent and omniscient he remains free to make use of other spiritual beings and magical forces, for example, as messengers, or as agents through which he can work.
- The main purpose and function of angels and other spiritual beings are to sing the praises of God.<sup>64</sup> According to this view the glory of God does not necessarily depend on the praise of the heavenly host, or on the eulogising of humans, but his glory is nonetheless demonstrated and/or expressed through acts of praising.
- In terms of the narrative and psychological effect on the believers, it makes sense to have other spiritual beings to interact with God. The dramatic effect of interaction and even conflict between God and other spiritual beings may serve the important function of bringing the reality of religious truths home.<sup>65</sup>

Although other supernatural forces may therefore exist within a monotheistic cosmology, their power and independence will always be limited to some extent. A monotheistic cosmology would therefore lean more towards the hands-on model, where all forces are channelled through the one omnipotent God. An autopilot model and some forms of randomness are, however, not totally excluded and could be explained in the following terms:

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<sup>62</sup> E.g. within some Protestant traditions demons, angels and the belief in impersonal magical forces are almost absent, whilst they are/were given much more prominence in certain Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Tylor, *Primitive culture*, 425-427.

<sup>64</sup> Cf. Luke 2:13.

<sup>65</sup> This is not to imply that extra religious beings were deliberately invented to serve a dramatic or psychological function, but only to explain why the supposed existence of such beings could be attractive and survive even when they have become redundant.

- God has established all natural and magical laws at creation and has determined that they would function more or less automatically (or randomly), with the option that they could occasionally be overruled.
- An autopilot model assures the freedom of choice for humans and hence the responsibility to make and live with their own choices. Human responsibility and freedom is more difficult to maintain when God actively runs every aspect of the universe, while the autopilot model makes it more feasible.

As is the case in a magico-mythical cosmology, one would often find *theoretical* confessions to confirm the hands-on model (affording constant and active involvement for God in the universe) while in *practice* it is stressed that humans have freedom of choice and must take full responsibility for their own fate.

Within monotheism two logical options exist in terms of how God could counteract the automatic effects of magical forces: They could either be countered *indirectly* by more powerful magic, or they can be *directly* overruled by the personal power of God, without having to resort to magic. Both views about God's ability to overrule impersonal effects, could coexist within the same cosmology, although a preference for one may be dominant in specific cases or scenarios. For example, in Exodus 7-9, it is suggested that God uses magic (through Aaron) to demonstrate his superior power over the Egyptian magicians.<sup>66</sup>

A third possibility that no magical forces were assumed, would theoretically be possible in monotheism, but most probably did not exist in pre-Enlightenment cosmologies. To assume that the Old Testament not only condemns magic, but that Old Testament religion is largely free from any belief in alternative magical forces, is to a large extent a post-Enlightenment bias.

A monotheistic cosmology is therefore even more complex than the magico-mythical one in that it adds another layer to the existing magical and animistic layers, that is, the monotheistic layer, with a belief in one omnipotent omniscient God. The way in which the forces in the other layers contribute to the mechanics of the universe, however, is drastically changed by the belief in one omnipotent and omniscient God, by severely limiting their independence and power. However, as argued repeatedly, a monotheistic cosmology does not

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<sup>66</sup> Thomas C. Römer, "Competing magicians in Exodus 7-9: Interpreting magic in the Priestly theology," in *Magic in the Biblical world*, (Todd E. Klutz ed., London: T & T Clark 2003), 20: "Indeed what he [the author] wants to prove is that the magic of God's word is more effective than the magic of the Egyptians."

totally rule out the magical and animistic layers as is often mistakenly assumed by scholars.

The complex monotheistic cosmology can therefore be illustrated by the following table (Table 1), illustrating the various layers, according to our “sandwich” model of religion:

**Table 1: The complex multilayered monotheistic cosmology**

Magical layer
Impersonal forces (magical and natural)
Animistic layer
A host of spirits and supernatural beings, all with limited power
Monotheistic layer
One omnipotent and omniscient God, running the universe with a <i>more or less</i> hands-on approach.

## 2 Reading Genesis 30 within a monotheistic cosmology

When Genesis 30:37-39 is interpreted within a monotheistic cosmology, the text could be read in the following way:

- Jacob used homeopathic magic to cause the desired colouring of the offspring.
- Although God’s direct involvement is not mentioned in the text, it can be assumed that being omnipotent and omniscient, He at least passively *allowed* the impersonal forces of magic to take their logical course.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>67</sup> It is also possible to interpret the text in such a way that Jacob’s belief in and use of magic is not affirmed by the text, and that the existence of impersonal magical forces was not assumed, but that it was God acting behind the scenes causing the ef-

## H DEISTIC AND ATHEISTIC COSMOLOGIES

Following on the rationalism of the Enlightenment and the development of the scientific method, a further move took place away from the hands-on model (regarding the mechanics of the universe) towards the autopilot (deistic model), or the completely automatic model (i.e. the atheistic cosmology) of the universe. According to these cosmologies the cosmos exists without (constant) interference of any supernatural force (either impersonal or personal).<sup>68</sup>

### 1 No magical layer

Within deistic and atheistic cosmologies the magical layer is totally scrapped and rejected as “primitive superstition.”<sup>69</sup> Deism and atheistic cosmologies further agree in viewing the universe as automatic, allowing (for all practical purposes) impersonal physical forces only.<sup>70</sup> The difference between deistic and atheistic cosmologies is that deism still allows for minimal personal supernatural involvement in the universe. For example, that God created the natural laws of the universe, which the universe has automatically followed since creation. A more extreme form of deism would maintain that over and above the creation of the natural laws, all further supernatural interference in the working of the cosmos is excluded. This extreme view does not only imply that “the time of miracles are over” (i.e. the possibility of overruling natural cause and effect), but also that God does not direct the natural processes of nature or history in any way.

On the other hand, a less extreme deistic view would maintain that in addition to establishing the laws of nature, God may also (in extreme cases) still direct the natural course of nature and history. For example, by directing the course of biological evolution towards the development of a predetermined

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fect. As argued earlier, such an interpretation would, however, be determined by a post-Enlightenment bias and would fall back on the old notion that magic and religion cannot co-exist.

<sup>68</sup> The gradual shift from a completely automatic supernatural and natural mechanistic view (i.e. in the magical cosmology) towards more hands-on supernatural cosmologies (magico-mythical and monotheistic), and back to a more automatic (mechanistic) cosmology (post-Enlightenment), was not a simple idealistic development, but a complex process where hands-on and autopilot models often co-existed within the same religious framework and even in the belief-system of a single person.

<sup>69</sup> Cf. Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An interpretation. The rise of modern paganism* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1966), 34; and Peet J. Van Dyk, “Creation, temple and magic. A magico-mythical reading of Genesis 1,” *OTE* 22/2 (2009): 422-436.

<sup>70</sup> The irony of this view is that it returns in a sense to the magical cosmology in allowing only for impersonal forces, but in this case only for natural (completely physical) and not for supernatural forces.

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goal (e.g. complex humans).<sup>71</sup> Both views of deism works with an autopilot model of the cosmos, but in the case of the extreme view, the autopilot system can in principle not be overruled once it has taken control of the cosmos, whereas with the less extreme view, it allows for a *minimal* possibility of overruling the autopilot system.

As can be appreciated, the deistic cosmology has moved to the brink of an atheistic cosmology, where not only the existence of impersonal supernatural forces are absolutely denied, but also the existence of personal supernatural beings. Within such a cosmology the universe would run fully automatically and its course would be determined by impersonal natural forces only (i.e. a consistent materialistic view). In an atheistic cosmology the laws of nature were not designed, but they are viewed as entirely natural consequences of our physical and chemical reality.<sup>72</sup>

## 2 Reading Genesis 30 within deistic and atheistic cosmologies

When Genesis 30:37-39 is read within deistic or atheistic cosmologies it may result in one of the following alternative interpretations:

### 2a Rationalising interpretations

Although Jacob may have believed in the magical effects of the rods, the result of an increased number of streaked or speckled or spotted offspring should be explained by some chemical component within the peeled rods. These chemicals were released in the water and after being ingested by the animals, caused the described result (i.e. in accordance with the Western health model). In this case the modern reader rejects Jacob's magical view.

The text does not suggest a belief in magic by Jacob. The effect was caused by the medicinal or chemical properties of the rods. In this case the modern reader wishes to maintain the inerrancy of the text by reading the assumptions of modern science into the text.

### 2b Rejection of magic

Within the *deistic* cosmology the text may be regarded as a "primitive" remnant of the belief in magic, which both Jacob and the first author of the text accepted. This "primitive" view should, however, be corrected in the light of

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<sup>71</sup> Cf. George C. Williams, *Adaptation and natural selection. A critique of some current evolutionary thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1966); Peet J. Van Dyk, *A brief history of creation* (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2001), for a critique of this view.

<sup>72</sup> This is the basis the stand of e.g. Richard Dawkins, *The God delusion* (London: Bantam Press, 2006).

the rest of the Bible's rejection of magical practices and be explained in terms of the gradual development of Old Testament religion.

## 2c Atheistic

The text is a prime example of the belief in magic, which is superstitious nonsense.

### I SUMMARISING CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion it can be noted that Genesis 30:37-39 could be interpreted in different ways, depending on the assumed underlying cosmology of the text. It was argued that misinterpretation mainly occurs when either the cosmology of the text is constructed incorrectly (e.g. in the case of Tylor and Frazer's idealistic scheme), or because modern readers may for various ideological reasons or because of ignorance assume that the biblical cosmology is identical to their current scientific one.

A more holistic definition of religion (to include impersonal magical forces) was proposed and the fact that different religious layers may coexist within the same cosmology suggested. Each cosmology presupposes a different kind of mechanics (cause and effect) for the cosmos and this fact may impact significantly on the interpretation of Genesis 30, as illustrated by the different readings of the text.

Based on the criteria suggested for identifying underlying magical assumptions within ancient texts, it can be concluded that Genesis 30:37-39 should be read against the assumptions of a monotheistic cosmology. However, this conclusion needs to be qualified immediately. Although the larger Old Testament context assumes a monotheistic cosmology, the immediate context of Genesis 30:37-39 strongly emphasises the magical layer. This is suggested by the fact that God's intervention is not in any way assumed or mentioned by the text. The effect of the peeled branches is automatic and impersonal and it is only within the larger Old Testament context that God's power (also over magical forces) may be assumed.<sup>73</sup>

[Although many variants of neo-paganism, within contemporary Christianity, advocate a return to the belief in magic, this would, if taken to its logical consequences, cancel all the accomplishments of the Enlightenment and effectively trash the whole scientific endeavour. In a sense, one could say that the magico-religious cosmologies of the Bible are in important ways completely incompatible with modern science. This fact necessitates that the modern

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<sup>73</sup> Although the historical development of the Israelite religion was not investigated in this article, it is more than probable that this specific text dates from an older layer of the religious tradition.

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reader should not only sometimes read “against the grain of the text,”<sup>74</sup> but also deliberately “demythologise” the Bible.<sup>75]</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Cf. David J. A. Clines, “Images of Yahweh: God in the Pentateuch,” in *Studies in Old Testament theology* (eds. Robert L. Hubbard, Robert K. Johnston and Robert P. Meye, Dallas: Word, 1992).

<sup>75</sup> Cf. Rudolph Bultmann, “The mythological element in the message of the New Testament and the problem of its re-interpretation Part1,” n.p. [cited 2 August 2010]. Online: <http://www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=431&C=292>. What Bultmann asks about mythology also applies to the belief in magic: “Can Christian preaching expect modern man to accept the mythical view of the world as true? To do this would be both senseless and impossible.” Bultmann therefore argued that the Bible should be demythologised while retaining its message.

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