

Bible - Belief Systems, Oral / Written Traditions, Myths, Songs & Folklore

- “Religion” refers to a belief system well established, organized, a system of norms & values founded on a belief in a superhuman order, a consciousness of supernatural powers or beings.
- Early humans perceive natural phenomena as manifestation of supernatural powers, superhuman order. Sun, moon, stars, rain, thunder, lightning, river, mountains, etc. were perceived as having a spirit – animism.
- Religiosity, spirituality are seen as genetically programmed in human. Even atheists believe in something. Man needs meaning in life, solace, being free from uncertainty and anxiety.
- Modern ideologies are no less religions called the natural-law religions, such as liberalism, Marxism, communism, capitalism, nationalism, Nazism, founded on belief in superhuman order.
- Belief in spirits – shamanism. Besides, there are sorcerers (sorcery), witches & wizards (witchcraft), magicians, voodoos, which are part of human belief systems.
- Voodoos in Africa also play the role of doctors. In pre-modern societies, witchcraft and medicine belong to same domain. Voodoos use plants, animal body parts as agents in healing or magic.
- Folk medicine, especially plant therapy, is common in many cultures: Chinese, South East Asians, Pacific islanders use extensively plants to treat ailments, diseases, sicknesses.
- The Bible condemns repeatedly people such as sorcerers, witches and magicians, and presents them as acting on behalf of the evil and against God. EXO 7.11-12. The dead are widely perceived as still having their spirit in existence. The Bible condemns people who resort to the device and service of mediums. 1SA 28.7-11
- Roles similar to shamans and played in formal belief systems are: priests, priestesses, Levites in OT, rabbi in Judaism, priests, bishops, pastors in Christianity, imam in Islam.
- Whole chapters in Pentateuch are devoted to the description of priests and Levites. There are passages in NT about church elders, deacons and overseers (episcopos / bishops, 1TI 3.1-7).
- The Bible also mentions about other beings than humans and God – angels, sons of God or heavenly beings (GEN 6.1-4; JOB 1.6; 2.1).
- The Bible reveals an understanding of the cosmology and cosmogony that does not match today’s science. Such as the earth is flat, around which circulate heavenly bodies.
- MYTHS: Ancient peoples had high & low level deities – gods and goddesses in charge of different phenomena & human activities. They have passions, feelings, weaknesses; need to be pleased, invoked, as they have some power & influence on humans. Hence sacrifices to gods as liturgy.
- Polytheists tend to be inclusive, open to syncretism, not to condemn heretics and infidels. The Romans persecuted the Christians for their refusal to worship emperors threatened authorities.

- Monotheism might not necessarily start with Judaism. Anthropologists think that monotheism might have started with the worship of Aten by Pharaoh Akhenaten (1353-1336 BC) in Egypt.
- Clear statement of a belief in one, exclusive, unique God in OT: DEU 6.4 «Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.» This underlines, emphasizes the uniqueness of the God of Israel.
- Beside polytheism and monotheism, there is also dualism, the belief in two equal forces and the battle between good and evil, sharp distinction between body & soul, matter & spirit.
- Monotheism (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) has also some dualistic concepts and dichotomies, so as to explain the existence of evil. Otherwise it is difficult to admit that there is only one God who is good. Belief in heaven and hell is also dualist in origin.
- There are mythical elements in the Bible. OT: Sea monsters such as Leviathan, Tannin, Behemoth, Rahab, Lilith. NT: Dragon
- Folklore encompasses tales, myths, legends of a particular culture.
- In ancient times, these were recited from memory and sung in songs, especially before the invention of writing. These songs were in poetry for the sake of easy memorization & recitation. That's why poetry contains many specific features to aid memorization, such as acrostics, parallelism, assonance, alliteration.
- There are many songs in the form of poetry in the Bible, like the Songs of Moses & Myriam after crossing the Red Sea (EXO 15), David's Song of the Bow, a lament sung to mourn for Saul and Jonathan (2SA 1.19-27), the Book of Psalms, the Song of Songs.
- Songs, folktales, myths, legendary stories, wisdom sayings constitute a people's cultural heritage; if lost, it would be a loss of identity for that people. So it is essential to record them down.
- Writing was needed and invented not for recording folklore, which remained for a long time oral and ascribed to memory.
- Writing was invented because of the need to record accounting of harvest, commerce, trade, properties, contracts, treaties, administration. The need for accurate record became more acute as human population increased and congregated, as agriculture and economy developed and legal matters arose.
- We can be fairly certain that the Pentateuch were first passed down by oral tradition for many centuries by the ancient Hebrews, i.e. by memorization & recitation from generation to generation, then recorded and written down separately in bits and pieces, and were only later assembled, compiled, edited in writing.
- Systematic editing and recording took place most likely during the twin-kingdoms first temple period. Thus occurred the transition from oral tradition to written tradition of the sacred text.