

# BIG GODS, LITTLE PEOPLE, BIBLICAL DATA

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## BACKGROUND

Members of the ethnographic/experimental team conclude that religious mythology emerged as a cultural support for prosocialism in large-scale human collectives (“watched people are nice people” A. Norenzayan *et al.* 2012. “Religious Prosociality: A Synthesis,” p. 9). Ancient myths of supernatural monitoring provided a moral behavioural context in which human civilizations exceeded the natural limits of tribal group living.

The so-called Western religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) are the *locus classicus* of the mythology of supernatural moral supervision. Christian and Muslim civilizations arose, it appears, from this basis. Since ethical monotheism was inherited from the Bible, particularly the biblical prophets, the ancient mythological archive should confirm experimental observation of a correlation between, religion, morality, and large-scale group living. As the headwaters of the Abrahamic supernatural monitoring (or enforcement) myth, the biblical prophets constitute a viable pool of ancient literary data by which to test the proposition.

The prophetic books of the Bible reflect a difficult period in the history of the ancient Israelite kingdoms, when they were stressed by Mesopotamian imperial expansionism. In the prophetic books the period is interpreted as a stage on which natural and supernatural agents interact. The god’s reactions to human behaviour are detected in international historical events, manifestations of his intervention. The mythological interpretation of history in these books provides a body of ancient literary data on the topic of supernatural monitoring, religion, and morality in an ancient civilization.

The data has a 2,500 year proximal advantage over modern experimental results for interpreting religion’s adaptive function. It provides a triangulation opportunity for the proposal since experimental subjects are uniformly contaminated by widespread cultural awareness of monitoring mythology in modern monotheistic religions.

## METHOD

Literary/morality content analysis: in a small-scale textual analysis the corpus of fifteen prophetic books was examined for moral content and supernatural oversight of the same. Key passages were subjected to intensive literary reflection using the “hair triggered,” embedded moral calculus of evolved human psychology. This humanistic approach is unappealingly old-fashioned and drab compared to a large-scale computer-based text analysis. But the integral approach, optimized for the duration of human evolution, has a natural fit with the material, not to mention researchers’ own moral logic.

Quantified analysis: aspects of the data that could be quantified were arithmetically analyzed with respect to the corpus as a whole (e. g., overall quantity of the literature devoted to morality and supernatural monitoring).

Two working definitions served as parsing paradigms for both approaches to the data:

- moral behaviour: individual(s) behaviour altruistically modified in view of the interests of another human member (or members) of the collective or of the collective as a whole;
- supernatural monitoring: claimed, reported or scrutinized examples of monitored human behaviour for intra-human moral aspects.

Four passes were made through 4,979 verses (141,140 words). Results were recorded in simple narrative notes and observations. E. g., for Amos 9.10, “All the sinners of my people shall die by the sword, who say, ‘Evil shall not overtake or meet us.’” Note: sin [חַטָּאִי עֲמִי] (בְּחַרְבַּ יָּמוֹתַי כָּל חַטָּאִי עֲמִי), an affront to the supernatural member of the collective] precipitates war, not immorality.

## RESULTS

A handful of cameos in the biblical prophets exhort intra-human morality, staking moral rhetoric on claims of supernatural investment and oversight (e. g., “Take away from me the noise of your songs; to the melody of your harps I will not listen. Rather, let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:23–24; cf. Isa 1; Micah 6:6–8; Hos 6:6; Jer 6:19–20; Jer 14:10–12). This sprinkling of passages constitutes the primary source for the received view that the prophets were Axial Age moral revolutionaries for ethical monotheism (e. g., R. Bellah. 2011. *Religion in Human Evolution* pp. 301, 303).

The majority of the prophetic corpus evidences only peripheral interest in intra-human morality. Only 2.67% (133 verses) directly concern morality. Double that number (5.56%, 277 verses) concern the more critical vertical dimension, wherein human behaviour directly offends the powerful supernatural member of the hybrid collective (the myth of a covenant community includes a god and human devotees). Given the prophets’ representation of Yahweh as a supernatural whose powers are more manifest and possibly augmented in war, even a war in which Israel was defeated, moral infringements on the supernatural’s social prerogatives were understood to be more pressing than the perception that he was interested in intra-human moral infractions.

Most of the prophetic verses (ca. 92%) are focused on interpreting history as a manifestation of divine power, without regard for moral entailment. Amoral supernatural power was the key, growing in inverse proportion to Israel’s weakening defences against Mesopotamian imperialism.

## CONCLUSION

The god of the prophets was a warrior before he was a watcher. Like the judgement day for which it stands guard, the supernatural eye in the sky comes later, when the god’s power as lord of the universe was secure. Not coincidentally, duties as Watcher grew in importance after conversations with the Persian supernatural Ahura Mazda, whose monitoring duties devolved from a role in a panoramic cosmic mythology that included judgement day. (The latter is only nascent in the biblical prophets.)

Throughout the period of prophetic monotheism’s development (8th–6th c. BC) Israel existed as a large-scale collective (100,000–400,000 [N. Gottwald. 2001. *Politics of Ancient Israel*, p. 190]). A society on this scale would have seized on a supernatural monitor with augmented policing power. But as characterized by the prophets Yahweh’s objective was power, not oversight of subordinates’ behaviour. The myth’s rationale is clear: the Mesopotamian wars put the god’s capability in doubt. His power mushrooms to rationalize his human affiliates’ national misfortune. It is a punishment, not a failure (e. g., “The days of punishment have come, the days of recompense have come; Israel shall know it” (Hos 9.7). Humans of all ethnic persuasions must be taught to cower (“little people”) before this god’s growing might. Might is mastery and monotheism sprouts from this submissive disposition. Moral concern (most of all for moral transgression of humans against the supernatural) is subordinate, part and parcel of the god’s dominion over the rabble of humanity (e. g., “Enter into the rock, and hide in the dust from before the terror of Yahweh, and from the glory of his majesty” (Isa 2.10).

‘God is watching.’ The mythological pairing of absolute power and intra-human moral monitoring is a comprehensive agent-based framework that seems designed to foster moral behaviour. But this is a modern mythological legacy, with only glimmers in the ancient strata of Abrahamic mythology. The ancients’ obsession with the key characteristic of supernatural agency—power—ensured that the focus of supernatural behavioural monitoring was on what moderns identify as religious behaviour, not moral. The relative moral disinterest of the supernatural, precisely when representations of his power were augmenting it, recommends caution with respect to the proposition that religion evolved to provide moral supervision services to expanding human collectives.