

# Storm god archetype: motives and common themes

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## **The Role of the Storm God**

### **An investigation into the spiritual relationship between human civilization and storms**

“ Storm gods” are a common motif in the myth and religions of ancient people worldwide. Despite the vast differences in these cultures, the power and personality of these storm gods showed common themes. Why is this storm god found in so many different cultures? What does this say about the significance of the storm to early humanity, or even humanity today?

Worship of storm gods in ancient cultures was centered around the defense of an ordered cosmos from primordial chaos, and therefore acted as a mystification of the order enforced by the state, an order essential to the survival of early civilizations, which has evolved into the modern concept of the monotheistic God.

Investigation of the myths of ancient civilization gives us most of the data about storm Gods. Myths are traditional stories that usually tell the history of a people or explain natural phenomenon. The importance of myth cannot be understated, they usually express the beliefs and values about these subjects held by a certain culture (Mark). Through the investigation of the myth surrounding storms, specifically storm gods, we can better understand the ancient people’s relationship with the natural world.

Deities from many different cultures can be placed under broad labels that describe their characteristics. The storm god is one such label. Storm gods span many different cultures, and were especially prevalent in ancient cultures (Schwemer) Storm gods were often incredibly powerful deities. For

example, Enil, the sumerian storm god, was considered the father of all  
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sumerians and the lord of gods. (Schwemer) Storms themselves were seen as being sent from Gods, for example. The ancient Greeks All occurrences of favorable or poor weather were thought to be a direct result of godly intervention (citation) To contemplate the possibility that the universe lacked controlling deities or that if they did exist, they ceased to concern themselves with human activity ages ago was to commit the crime of hubris. (cite) In essence, the act of hubris put the entire society at risk and was therefore punishable by death. In the same way, storms could punish the society for the actions of one. The crime of hubris endangered the society. Because storms were seen as an act of divine will, rather than the result of random meteorological conditions, as we see them today, storms had purpose and reason.

It is important to note that the relative significance and sphere of activities of the individual storm-gods was dependent on the climate regions in which they were worshiped. The powers of the storm gods were extremely location based. For example, because the Babylonian agricultural system was dependent on agriculture rather than rainfall, unlike in other areas the storm gods of that region did not control rainfall levels. Instead, the Babylonian storm god's power mainly manifested in the violent destructive storms that were common to the area (Schwemer). Often the iconography of mountains is associated with storm gods in places surrounded by cloud topped mountains, whereas the sea is the primary domain of the storm god in harbor cities, for example the Levantine harbor city of Ugrait (Schwemer).

The divine manifestation of the natural phenomenon can be seen as an effort for control in areas that cannot be influenced by human intervention such as storms. Therefore, any force more powerful than humankind was seen as the work of the divine. Ancient polytheistic world views were centered around causation. By assigning names and personalities to these divine forces, early peoples could more easily communicate with them and deter the chaos (Ruass).

As a result the storm-gods were an incredibly important figure in the spiritual mind of the ancient peoples; “ storm gods, symbolic of the moving forces of the air, never lost their seniority in polytheism” (Cliff 233). An important function of the storm god was to constantly fight and prevail to retain his power as head of the gods (Leeming 187). The storm gods bestowed power upon the mortals of the state, and therefore can be seen as an extension of the state.

In *The Storm God of the Near East*, Green asserts that the storm God was the primary source of centralized political power. (Green) Enil for example, the Sumerian storm god was called “ he who bestows kingship” (Schwermer). “ The storm god seems to reflect the influence of law on the public domain” (Bodel 153) The Greek Zeus was the most important deity of ancient Greece. He was the overseer of earthly events. Zeus was the god of law and social order and a patron god of marriage and the household (citation). Tarhun, an ancient Anatolian weather god, was the supreme deity of the Hittite pantheon and was regarded as the embodiment of the state in action. (Encyclopedia Britannica). Baal the storm god of the Canaanites, name

literally translates to the hebrew word for “ owner” or “ lord”, and he was often referred to as the Prince or Lord of the Earth (Encyclopedia Britannica). It is clear that the storm gods in ancient religions were often considered heads of the cosmic state.

Enil was considered the spirit of the storm, he embodied the legitimate use of force of the state, as executor of the verdicts of the gods. He was essentially the divine sheriff. (Frankfurt) Without a claim to righteous use of force, a state cannot be seen as a legitimate. Enil’s power is an extension of this essential component of the state, an example of the way storm gods, served to order the seemingly chaotic.

The patriarchal nature of the storm god could also be interpreted as a reflection of the patriarchal state; “ The earth was usually portrayed as a motherly figure, whereas the storm god or god of the skies was almost always male. It is not without significance that the enforcer of law was almost always a man in societies that were predominantly patriarchal” The Babylonians believed that a female storm goddess Tiamat who would strike randomly, and represented the forces of chaos, was overcome in battle by the storm god Marduk, who restored order to the Earth (Leeming). Tiamat represented both femininity and chaos, and therefore had to be repressed by the patriarchal order of the state, represented by Marduk. The image of the patriarch storm god as enforcer of the laws of society is evidence of the fact that the storm god himself was a reflection of the state.

One way that the storm gods exerted their legitimate use of force was through the use of storms as punishment. Storms as punishment for human

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behavior is a motif seen in many ancient religions, for example For example, the ancient tribes of Malaya believed that Thunder and lightning are caused by spirits, the Kaasab and the Sumisi who fight on account of unusual or bad actions. (citation). Zeus, as the enforcer of supreme law, would often use lightning to strike mortals who disobeyed the moral greek code. The Native American cree tribe tells a story of a hunter who was punished by a storm for killing pelicans unnecessarily, “ Surprised by the warrior’s actions, my mother turned to him and using a firm voice, told him that he had tampered with the law of nature. Needlessly killing pelicans she said, would bring the wind to answer this desecration.” Occasionally this enforcement was done by demons rather by the gods; “ generally, ‘ evil’ demons seem to have been conceived as mere agents and executors of the will of gods; their rôle was to implement divinely ordained punishment for sin. Such `evil’ demons were often imagined as weather spirits, of the wind or storms.” (Black) In all of these cultures, storms are sent as punishment for actions that go against the moral code of the society, reflecting the role of the state through the natural world, an attempt to order what seems inherently chaotic.

The sphere of control of the storm gods is often dual in nature. The storm god can employ both the destructive power of the storm and the life giving fertilizing power. Therefore, the storm god serves as both punisher and rewarder, reflecting the hand of nature. (Green) Thor for example, the norse god, had both powers of storms and fertility. In The Storm God in the Near East, Alberto Green presents evidence that the storm gods in that region all shared the iconography of both the lion and the bull. He explains that these icons represent both the storm gods roles as combatant and fertilizer, both

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the ender of life and the bringer of life (Green) A Sumerian hymn describes an offering to the storm god describes him as "...the great bull, the supreme bull who treads the earthly passage, making the corn good and the grain luxuriant" (Bunyan) In *Geologic Model of Religion*, Andrew cliff asserts that Thor was also seen as the "bringer of life" because the wind was associated with breath. The Shoshone myth of Telpinu specifically shows the significance of these dual aspects to the ancient people. Telpinu was a weather god, however the people refused to worship him. So he put on his moccasins and left out of anger. When he left "babies died in the womb and crops starved" (Leeming) here we see the fertility aspect of the god. However, the people also "went wild, robbing and killing without Telpinu to punish them"(Leeming), showing the enforcement, order keeping side of the God. The people performed dances to appease the God and when he returned, things returned to normal. This myth shows the necessity of both the order and the fertility that the storm god brought, much like the role of the state. Without both the order and the abundance provided by the storm god, the society perished, reflecting stateless anarchy. These dual powers of punishment and reward are a reflection of the tactics the state uses to keep order, further evidence of the storm god's role as extension of the state.

The authority of the sky is a reflection of the power which produces automatic acceptance and obedience. (Frankfurt). This automatic and unquestioning obedience is essential to human society. Without it the early societies would have crumbled into chaos. "In those persons in whom authority resided- the father of the family, the ruler of the state, the Mesopotamian recognized something of Enil. As father of the gods Enil was

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the prototype of all fathers, as “pristine king and ruler” he was the prototype of all rulers... to him belong the insignia in which the essence of royalty was embodied- and from him they were derived” (Frankfurt)

Creation myths in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Greece generally express the idea of the creation and defense by the storm god of universe that is ordered against a primordial chaotic force. (Black) These creation myths often took the form of a battle between a Storm God and a sea serpent. This motif can be found in the creation stories of many cultures. In Hittite mythology, Teshub, the god of storms defeats the serpent Illuyanka, establishing order to the world. The same story is found in the myth of the battle between Thor and the serpent Jörmungandr, or the Vedic Indra vs. Vritra (Black). Although not in the form of the serpent Enil, for example, as champion of the gods, vanquished the forces of chaos that threatens them. In the battle between chaos and order, the storm god is the common champion of order, a reflection of the purpose of the early state. Thus in the universe of the ancient people, the storm god is not only the enforcer, but also the defender of the universe against chaos, and thus serves as a mystification of the role of the state in society

Now that it has been established It is possible to track the role of the ancient storm god to the role of the monotheistic god that developed later, “This storm god concept has been one of the most potent forces in the evolution of the religious experience of early man. To a certain degree it has evolved into the mythical foundation of the modern conception of god” -The Storm-god in the Ancient Near East. One obvious way we see this, is that the modern god



is capable of sending storms, in fact this power seems sometimes to define the modern god. The Koran for example says, “ He it is who showeth you lightning and launches the thunderbolts.”

It has been established that the polytheistic storm gods were often extensions of the state itself, and we can certainly see a continuation of this concept to the modern God; “ For the kingdom is the Lord’s and he is the governor among the nations.” (Psalms 22: 28) Like the storm god the modern God also concerns himself with obedience to the state; “ Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord’s sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme Or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well. For so is the will of God, that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men As free, and not using your liberty for a cloke of maliciousness, but as the servants of God. Fear God. Honour the king.” (Peter 2: 13-2: 17) Like Enil, “ he who bestows divine kingship”, the modern god also demands obedience to the state.

Another way the modern God can be seen as having evolved from the storm god is the use of storms as punishment. For example in the story of Noah’s Ark, God sends a storm, and subsequent flood to purge the earth of humans that have become corrupt; “ The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time. The Lord regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled. So the Lord said, ‘ I will wipe from the face of the earth the human

race I have created—and with them the animals, the birds and the creatures that move along the ground—for I regret that I have made them” (Genesis 6: 4-6: 6). This mirrors almost exactly the Babylonian god Huracan who sent a flood to wipe out the evil humans from the world (Cavedish)

In Exodus, God also sets a storm upon Egypt as punishment for the enslavement of the Hebrew people; “ Then the Lord said to Moses, “ Get up early in the morning, confront Pharaoh and say to him, ‘ This is what the Lord, the God of the Hebrews, says: Let my people go, so that they may worship me, or this time I will send the full force of my plagues against you and against your officials and your people, so you may know that there is no one like me in all the earth.... Therefore, at this time tomorrow I will send the worst hailstorm that has ever fallen on Egypt, from the day it was founded till now.” (Exodus 9: 13-9: 18). In both cases the modern God exhibits the powers we saw earlier in the storm gods of ancient peoples, both control over storms and punishment by storms of people for their wrongdoing.

This concept can also be seen in the modern setting. Many religious conservatives believed that Hurricane Katrina was the result of God’s divine wrath. For example, evangelicalist John Hagee said “ I believe that New Orleans had a level of sin that was offensive to God, and they are — were — recipients of the judgment of God for that. The newspaper carried the story in our local area, that was not carried nationally, that there was to be a homosexual parade there on the Monday that the Katrina came.” (Black 44). Even in the modern era, we see the continuation of the ancient storm god motif of storms as punishment.

In Geologic Model of Religion Andrew Cliff asserts the Yahweh, who was originally a storm god, developed into the monotheistic god; “ At the point when Yahweh, the great storm god, absorbed the powers of the lesser gods, true monotheism had arrived” (Cliff 314). The case of Yahweh shows that the Storm Gods of ancient civilizations, evolved into the monotheistic concept of God, even keeping his name. The Oxford Companion to World Mythology claims that “ As the combination of the principle roles as the tripartite godhead; warrior, storm god, sovereign, and guardian of proper behavior, Zeus is likely a logical predecessor to the Christian God” (Leeming 129). Thus we can see the direct evolution from the storm gods of the past to the monotheistic gods found in the Judeo-Christian and Islamic religions that are more commonly worshipped today.

It may be concluded that the modern view of god has evolved from the ancient concept of the storm god archetype which spanned many cultures. Analysis of many ancient storm gods can yield common characteristics. These include vast powers of both punishment and fertility, which put them at the head of the spiritual hierarchy. These powers show that storm gods were the mystical manifestation of the powers of the state in early civilization. They are forces, fundamentally of order, reflecting the ancient people’s need to find order and causation in the seemingly chaotic world that affected their everyday lives. The power of these myths cannot be underestimated, they are a window into the mind of the early human, specifically their relationship with the natural world around them. By investigating the role of these ancient storm deities and their modern

counterpart we may better understand man's view of his own role in the natural world.