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## **Tree and serpent worship**

**Fergusson, James**

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Egypt

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of faith than we are now able to do. At all events we shall then be in a position to say whether it was a real partnership or only an accidental juxtaposition. In the meanwhile, all that is required in this place is to draw attention to the subject, and to point out a coincidence which is so remarkable that when investigated it may hereafter lead to the most important results.\*

## EGYPT.

In an attempt to investigate any form of ancient mythology from an historical point of view, we naturally turn first to Egypt; for not only was Egypt the earliest civilized of all the countries of the ancient world, in so far at least as we at present know, but she was pre-eminently the parent of all idolatries. With the Egyptians all knowledge was considered as divine, and whatever they saw, they worshipped. Their gods had been kings; their kings were gods; and all the animal kingdom was considered worthy of worship in a greater or less degree. From bulls to beetles, or from crocodiles to cats, it made little difference; all came alike to a people so essentially religious as the Egyptians seem to have been. It is little wonder, therefore, that Serpents, and it may be Trees, should be included in their multifarious Pantheon, and it is easy to detect numerous instances of the honours bestowed on both. Still it would be straining the argument beyond its legitimate issue to describe the Egyptians as in any sense an essentially Tree or Serpent worshipping people. The serpent was worshipped on the banks of the Nile among other animals, perhaps in some instances with a certain degree of pre-eminence;† but on the whole the accounts are hardly sufficient to enable us to say that the serpent was more honoured than his associated animal gods. At the same time it must be admitted that the serpent very frequently appears in the sculptures of the Temple walls, and frequently in a place of honour, as on the brow of the king, or as a prominent ornament of his dress, but hardly ever there with that pre-eminence he attained in other countries.

The relative position of Tree Worship among the Egyptians seems to be almost the same. It is true that the important part which the Tamarisk (*Ερλίκη*) plays in the legend of Isis and Osiris, as told by Plutarch,‡ might tend to a somewhat different conclusion, and the prominence given to the other tree (*Μηρίδην*), which marked and shaded the tomb of Osiris in the same legend, might lead to the conclusion that a form of Tree Worship prevailed in Egypt before the multifarious Theban pantheon was elaborated. The authority, however, for these facts is not such as can be relied upon, and the sculptures again do not favour the belief that Trees were considered as divine on the banks of the Nile, though they may justify the belief that the sycamore was sacred to the goddess Netpe, and the persea to Athor.§

\* As human sacrifices hardly form part of the subject of the work, I have not thought it necessary to encumber the text of this section with notes or references. The subject has been exhaustively treated by Kalish, in his Commentary on Leviticus XXIII. p. 381 to 416. I am also much indebted to an unpublished essay by Sir John Acton, where the whole question is treated with his usual depth of learning.

† Herodotus, II. 74. Ælian, de Animal. XVII. 5. Clemens Alex. III. 2. p. 93.

‡ Plutarch, de Iside et Osiri, 11. Wilkinson's Ancient Egyptians, vol. V. p. 261, et seq.

§ Wilkinson, vol. IV. p. 391, plates 36 and 54, &c.



The great test of such a subject in Egypt are the sculptures which cover the walls of the Temples. These are the Bible of the Egyptians, in so far at least as we know it. Any one studying these with that object might easily pick out fifty or a hundred examples which would tend to show that the Egyptians were both Tree and Serpent worshippers; but, on a fair review of the whole subject, these would probably be found to be only a fractional part of the nature worship of the Egyptians, and neither the most prominent nor the most important.\* In spite, therefore, of the passages in classical authors which may be quoted against this view, it would probably be incorrect to include the ancient Egyptians among the votaries either of the Serpent or of Trees.

#### JUDEA.

The earliest distinct allusion which we have to those mysterious properties which the ancients attributed to certain Trees, is to be found in the second and third chapters of Genesis. The planting of the Trees of Life and Knowledge in the Garden of Eden is there described in minute detail, and judging from subsequent forms of the story, their custody seems to have been intrusted to the serpent. Taken by itself, this narrative has always appeared one of the least intelligible parts of the Pentateuch, and numberless theories have been formed to account for what seemed so completely outside the range of ordinary human experience. With the knowledge we now possess, it does not seem so difficult to understand what was meant by the curse on the serpent, or the prohibition to eat the fruit of the trees. When the writers of the Pentateuch set themselves to introduce the purer and loftier worship of the Elohim, or of Jehovah, it was first necessary to get rid of that earlier form of faith which the primitive inhabitants of the earth had fashioned for themselves. The serpent, as the principal deity of that early religion, was cursed "above all cattle, and above every beast of the field;"† and in future there was to be for ever enmity between the serpent and "man of woman born." The confusion of ideas on this subject seems to have arisen from the assumption that the curse was directed at the reptile as such, and not rather at a form of worship which the writers of the Pentateuch must have regarded with horror, and which they thought it necessary to denounce in the strongest terms and in the form they believed would be most intelligible by those to whom it was addressed. The tree it was not necessary should be cursed; the fruit of the tree of knowledge had been eaten, and no further result could be obtained by access to it, while the tree of life was guarded by a cherub with a flaming sword, and all approach prevented. Its fruits could not then be obtained, nor have they to the present day.

The two chapters which refer to this, however,—as indeed the whole of the first eight of Genesis,—are now generally admitted by scholars to be made up of fragments of earlier books or earlier traditions belonging, properly speaking, to Mesopotamian rather than to Jewish history, the exact meaning of which the writers of the

\* On such a monument, for instance, as the Sarcophagus of Menepthah, in Sir John Soane's Museum, where the Serpent occurs more frequently than on any monument of the same extent I am acquainted with, and in a more important character, there is not one instance in which it can be said he is being worshipped. He is the representative of heaven—is a good or evil genius—a protector or destroyer—a mere hieroglyphic—anything, in short, but never a god.—See Bonomi's published account of the Sarcophagus: Longman, 1864.

† Genesis, iii. 14.