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Tree and serpent worship

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London, 1868

Judæa

[urn:nbn:de:hbz:466:1-62112](https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:hbz:466:1-62112)

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.

Pentateuch seem hardly to have appreciated when they transcribed them in the form in which they are now found. The history of the Jews and of the Jewish religion commences with the call of Abraham, and from that time forward the worship of Serpents and Trees took an infinitely less important position, though still occasionally cropping up, often when least expected, but apparently not as a religion of the Jews, but as a backsliding towards the feelings of the pre-existing races among whom they were located.

There is apparently no mention of serpents, either in the Bible or in any of the traditions in connexion with Abraham or his immediate descendants; but that Patriarch "planted a grove at the well of the covenant (Beersheba), and called there "on the name of the Lord"*—a circumstance the more worthy of note, as it is the earliest mention of a form of worship to which continual allusions are afterwards made in Jewish history. The oak, or rather the terebinth tree, under which Abraham is said to have entertained the angels at Mamre, became an object of extreme veneration to his descendants, and, if we may trust Eusebius, was worshipped down to the time of Constantine.† The pious zeal of that emperor led him to desecrate its altars, and apparently to cut down the sacred tree to make way for a Christian church which he erected on the spot, and which was then or afterwards dedicated to St. George.‡

With the time of Moses the indications became more distinct and palpable. We gather from the context in the Bible,§ and still more from the narrative of Josephus,|| that the tree or bush on Horeb, from which the Lord appeared to Moses as a flame, had been considered sacred before that event. It was, indeed, apparently in consequence of its sanctity that it was chosen for the delivery of the oracle, while the conversion on that occasion of Moses' rod into a serpent brings these two names into the juxtaposition in which they are so frequently found. This miracle on Horeb would, however, be more impressive and more to the point were it not that it was repeated by Aaron before Pharaoh, and copied by the Egyptians;¶ but at the burning bush it stands alone, and without any apparent motive for its exhibition there, except the appropriateness of the combination.

With the Brazen Serpent in the Wilderness** we tread on surer ground; it is the first record we have of actual worship being performed to the Serpent, and it is also remarkable, as the cause of this adoration is said to have been its healing powers. From the readiness with which this explanation was adopted by the Jews, it would seem as if that characteristic had been ascribed to the Serpent before that time. We now, however, learn it for the first time, though we afterwards become so familiar with it in Greek mythology, where the Serpent himself represents Æsculapius, and is the indispensable concomitant of Hygieia.

From this time we lose sight of the worship of the Serpent from the narrative of the Bible, till it somewhat unexpectedly reappears in the time of Hezekiah. We then learn that the brazen image that Moses had set up, had for more than five centuries

* Genesis, xxi. 33.

† Eusebius, Vita Constantini, III. 53.

‡ The oak now pointed out at Hebron as Abraham's tree is in quite another locality.

§ Exodus, iii. 5.

|| Josephus, Antiq. Ju. II. 12. 1.

¶ Exodus, vii. 8.

** Numbers, xxi. 9.

been preserved in the Temple, and that "unto those days the children of Israel did burn incense to it."* It was only then, after six centuries of toleration, that it was resolved to put an end to this idolatry, together with the kindred worship of the Groves. In the intermediate period there is hardly any expression that countenances the belief that the worship of Serpents generally prevailed among the Jews, unless it be one in the Wisdom of Solomon, where it is said, "They worshipped serpents void of reason,"† in strange contrast with the New Testament expression, "Be ye wise as serpents."‡

Neither in the Bible, however, nor in the Talmud,§ is there anything that would justify the assertion that Serpent Worship, even in the most modified form, prevailed among the Jews after its abolition by Hezekiah. It cropped up again, as we shall presently see, in the Christian sect of Ophites, but probably in this instance the superstition was derived from Persia.

The case is different with the worship of Trees or Groves. The first form of this appears to have arisen from the veneration paid to natural groves, and the worship offered therein to Baal|| and other foreign gods, but the Grove or Asherah is also frequently an image, no doubt like that emblem so often represented on the Assyrian sculptures.¶ This is an artificial tree, such as might have been placed alongside of the Brazen Serpent within the Temple at Jerusalem.**

It hardly admits of doubt but that this worship of the Asherah or of Groves was a true and essential form of Tree Worship, but it seems to have been local, and entirely opposed to the spirit of the Jewish religion. As a rule it is reprobated by their chroniclers and prophets, and eventually disappears. Had it ever been really adopted by the Jewish legislators, we might perhaps be able to ascertain more correctly its origin and affiliations. Possibly we may do so when the Assyrian antiquities are more completely investigated than they now are. For the present we must rest content with the knowledge that both Trees and Serpents were worshipped in Judea, and hope that some new light may some day be thrown on the subject.

Even, however, if in abeyance, we can hardly suppose that Serpent Worship was extinguished in Judea, inasmuch as immediately after the Christian era we found it bursting forth again with wonderful exuberance in the sects of the Nicolaitans, the Gnostics, and more especially that called the Ophites (Οφίται). Of the latter, Tertullian tells us, "they even prefer the Serpent to Christ, because the former brought the knowledge of good and evil into the world. They point also to his majesty and power, inasmuch as when Moses raised the Brazen Serpent in the Wilderness, whoever looked on it was healed; and they even quote the Gospels to prove that Christ was an imitation of the serpent, because it is said, 'As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up'" (John, iii. 14).††

* 2 Kings, xviii. 4.

† Wisdom, xi. 15.

‡ Matthew, x. 16.

§ I make the assertion on the authority of Mr. Deutsch, of the British Museum, who has kindly looked through the Talmud for me with reference to the question.

|| 2 Kings, xvii. 16.

¶ Lord Aberdeen's black stone, History of Architecture, W.C. 75; see also British Museum Sculptures, and Layard's and Botta's plates, *passim*.

** 1 Kings, xvi. 33; 2 Kings, xxi. 3, xxiii. 4 & 6; Isaiah, xvii. 8, xxvii. 9, &c.

†† Tertullian, de Prescript. Hereticorum, c. xlvi.

Epiphanius describes these ceremonies in the following terms: "They keep a living serpent in a chest, and at the time of the mysteries entice him out by placing bread before him. The door being opened he issues forth, and having ascended the table folds himself above the bread.* This they call a perfect sacrifice. They not only break and distribute this among the votaries, but whosoever wishes it may kiss the serpent. This the wretched people call the Eucharist. They conclude the ceremonies by singing a hymn through him to the Supreme Father."†



CISTA, FROM A ROMAN COIN OF ADRAMYTUM.

There are other paragraphs to the same effect, and the representations of serpents and Serpent Worship in the so-called Gnostic form are too numerous and too familiar to require further notice here.‡

We have no means of knowing how long this worship of the Serpent continued to prevail in Syria—most probably down to the seventh century, when the Mahomedan invasion swept away a large mass of the parasitic superstitions which had fastened themselves on Christianity; but the literature of that age is so mixed up with fables and misrepresentations, that it is very difficult to write confidently about anything it describes.

Except the instance above alluded to, of the Terebinth at Mamre, I am not aware of any authentic instance of direct Tree Worship in Syria after the Christian era, but there may be, though, as they have not hitherto been looked for, they may still remain unknown.

* *Pigraque labetur circa do aria serpens.*—Ovid, *Amor. Eleg. lib. ii.*

† Epiphanius, *lib. i. Hæres: XXXVII. p. 267, et seq.*

‡ Though not bearing directly on the subject, the "Legend of the True Cross" is a curious example of a cognate superstition. Like most Mediæval legends, it is so childish that it would be hardly worth while to allude to it, but it contains an earlier oriental element, which may be considered as throwing some light on the old form of worship.

The legend relates that when Adam was on his death-bed, he sent Seth to try and regain admission to Paradise. This, of course, was impossible, but he was allowed by the angel who guarded it to look in at the gate. He saw, among other things, the tree which had borne the fatal fruit, its roots then extending to hell, but its upper branches reaching to heaven. The angel gave him three seeds, recommending him to place them in Adam's mouth, when he died. He did so, and they produced three trees, a cedar, a cypress, and a pine. These afterwards united into one, and their branches performed many miracles. Solomon cut down the tree, and tried in vain to use its trunk to support the roof of his palace. It disdained such a use, and was consequently thrown across the Brook Cedron to be trodden upon. It was rescued from this ignominy by the Queen of Sheba, and buried below the Pool of Bethesda, which owed its healing properties to its virtues. It came to the surface when wanted for the Cross, and afterwards was buried in Calvary, where it was recognized by the Empress Helena in consequence of its miraculous healing powers. It was taken to Persia by Chosroes, and recovered by Heraclius, and afterwards, as is well known, throughout the middle ages a piece of the wood of the True Cross was prized by emperors and kings beyond all other earthly possessions. So great, indeed, was the demand that it was endowed with the property of self-multiplication, but even this did not suffice to bring it into contempt, and as late as 1248 Philip Augustus erected the Sainte Chapelle to enshrine a morsel of the wood of the tree of Paradise. The Sainte Chapelle may thus be considered as the last, as it probably is among the most beautiful, temples ever erected to Tree Worship.

All this is so silly that the only excuse for alluding to it is, that throughout the earlier past there runs a thread of oriental myth different from the clumsy inventions of ordinary mediæval miracle mongers, and this, if properly investigated, might perhaps throw some light on the feelings with which sacred trees were regarded in ancient times, and tell us something of the causes which led to their being so universally worshipped.¹

¹ The following authorities for the legend are quoted by S. Baring Gould, in his "Myths of the Middle Ages," from which the above is abridged; *Vita Christi*, Troyes, 1517; *Legenda Aurea* de Jacques de Voragine; *Geschiedenis van het Heylighe Cruys*; *Speculum Historiale*, by Gottfried von Viterbo, &c.