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Tree and serpent worship

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Mesopotamia

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MESOPOTAMIA.

As hinted above, the Garden of Eden was supposed to have been situated somewhere on the Lower Euphrates, and the story of the earlier patriarchs down to Noah (Xisuthrus) being common to the narratives of Berossus and Moses, we naturally turn to Babylonia in the hope of being able to point out the mythical relations of that strange faith which is first mentioned as existing in that country. Unfortunately, long before the Greeks or any foreign travellers visited Babylonia, the great wave of the dominion of the Semitic Assyrian had passed over it, and nearly obliterated all traces of the earlier Chaldean forms, and as strangers ignorant of the language, it is hardly to be expected that they would have dug up the fossil remains of an extinct religion. The earliest native historian (Berossus) lived after the time of Alexander (B.C. 270 ?), so that he too was likely to pass over what had been so long forgotten. The one chance that now remains to us for recovering it is from the cuneiform inscriptions. Serpent Worship, so far as I know, has not yet been looked for among them, and till they are examined with special reference to the inquiry, it is impossible to say where it may or may not be found. In the meanwhile, Sir Henry Rawlinson informs us, that Hea, or Hoa, the third person in the Babylonian trinity of great gods, may be considered as the serpent deity, "since there are very strong grounds for connecting him with the serpent of Scripture, and the paradisaical traditions of the tree of knowledge and the tree of life."*

The only direct testimony we have of Serpent Worship in Babylon is in that part of the Book of Daniel which is now printed separately in the Apocrypha,† though it is difficult to understand why this should be so. The story told there of the fraud of the priests and the indignation of the people at the destruction of their god all bear so strong an impress of probability that it is difficult to doubt their truth.

The story as it stands, except in its catastrophe, is not unlike one related by Ælian,‡ as occurring in Egypt, in the days of Ptolemy Euergetes. The description of the serpents of Metele is nearly identical with this of Babylon, but there the only result was that the prying priest went mad, and for all we know the serpent continued to receive his daily dole for long afterwards.

Herodotus, strange to say, deserts us in this difficulty, and the only indication in Diodorus is in his description of the three statues that adorned the great Temple of Belus; that of Rhea being accompanied by two very large silver images of serpents, each weighing 30 talents; and that of Juno, standing with her right hand resting on a serpent's head.§

No mention of Tree Worship has, so far as known, been brought to light in Babylonia, but in Assyria it is among the most common forms of idolatrous veneration. The representations of this on Lord Aberdeen's black stone has already been alluded to, and it occurs at least twenty times as a principal object in Layard's plates, and very frequently also in Botta.||

* Herodotus translated, &c., by Geo. Rawlinson, vol. I., p. 600.

† Story of Bel and the Dragon, v. 23, et seq.

‡ Ælian, de Animal. XVI. 39.

§ Diodorus, II. 9. 5.

|| Monument de Ninive, 5 vols. folio. Paris, 1846-50.

It can hardly be doubted but that this is the Asherah or Grove so frequently mentioned in the Bible, and is a true form of Tree Worship; but no thorough investigation has yet been made by any one competent to the task, in order to ascertain how and where it arose, or what the exact ideas were which it represented. Judging *à priori*, I would feel inclined to suggest that the Serpent Worship was a peculiarity of the Turanian Babylonians of the old Chaldean Empire—Tree Worship that of the Semitic Assyrians; but a great deal has yet to be done before this can be either positively affirmed or rejected, and the reasons for even suggesting it will be more easily understood when our present task is further advanced.

GREECE.

In attempting to explain the phenomena presented by the architectural history of Greece, it seems necessary, as a basis for any reasoning on the subject, to assume the existence in that country of two distinct and antagonistic races at one period of the story. The one race is represented by the tombs, or so-called treasuries, of Mycenæ and Orchomenos, and the megalithic polygonal masonry of the walls of the most ancient cities. To the other belongs the chaste intellectual refinement of the Doric order, while between the two intervenes the elegant and ornate Ionic as a compromise combining the peculiarities of each.

The first class of buildings have been ascribed to the Pelasgi; and though considerable difference of opinion exists as to the exact ethnological position of those people, and whence they came, there seems no valid objection to assuming that they were a people of a race entirely different to the Hellenes, who afterwards superseded them. If not of purely Turanian race, they must have been so closely allied to that family that, till the contrary is shown, they may be considered as belonging to it.

The same distinction seems indispensable in treating of the mythology of ancient Greece. Assuming the Veda and the Zend Avesta to be exponents of the religious feelings of the Aryans, it is impossible to understand—if language is any test in such a matter—how a people speaking a tongue so purely Aryan as the Greek, could so completely have relapsed into a Turanian ancestral worship as we find that of Greece in its great age. Unless a great substratum of the inhabitants of Greece belonged to the Turanian family, their religion, like their language, ought to have presented a much closer affinity to the earlier scriptures of the Aryan race than we find to be the case. The curious anthropic mythology of the Grecian Pantheon seems only explicable on the assumption of a potential Turanian element in the population, though the study of the language fails to reveal to us its existence.

Such an hypothesis is still more indispensable when we refer to the Tree and Serpent Worship that certainly prevailed to a greater or less extent during the whole period of Grecian history, though of course more prominently during the earlier part. Here again it is necessary to make a further distinction. All the earlier myths refer to the destruction of serpents or of serpent races. This continues down to the return of the Heraclidæ; after that time, when Hellenic supremacy was assured, we meet with a kindlier feeling. The serpent then became the oracle—the guardian of the city, or the healing god,—the Agathodæmon in short. In Greece, as everywhere else, when a new faith once feels secure in its position, it no longer objects to the forms which it