

Jealous Gods & Chosen People

The Mythology of the Middle East

A new perspective on the ancient myths of modern-day
Iraq, Turkey, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, Jordan,
Yemen, the Gulf States, and Saudi Arabia



DAVID LEEMING

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Preface



The purpose of this book is to provide a comprehensive study of the mythologies of the area of the world that has been called, with varying degrees of inclusion and/or accuracy, the Middle East, the Near East, the Levant, and the Fertile Crescent. In colonial British usage the "Near East" was the Balkans and Asia Minor. More recently it has been used more or less interchangeably with the "Middle East." The Fertile Crescent is the fertile land forming an arch around the Syrian steppes and including the eastern Mediterranean coastal lands beginning with Egypt in the west, southeastern Anatolia (Asian Turkey) in the north, and Mesopotamia ("between the rivers," referring to the Tigris and Euphrates—present-day Iraq) in the east. "Levant" was a term used primarily by the Europeans in reference to the countries bordering the eastern Mediterranean. The term comes from the old French word meaning "rising," referring to the rising of the sun in the east or Orient. In common usage, particularly in the geopolitical context, the term "Middle East" has assimilated all of the above designations, referring to the areas of Asia and Africa bordered by Libya in the west and Pakistan in the east, and including Turkey in the north and the Arabian Peninsula in the south. In this book, then, "Middle East" includes all of the land masses to which the various terms in question refer.

Because myths of various cultures both reflect and affect history and because the mythology and religion of one culture can directly

influence the mythology and religion of others, I have divided the book into two parts, the first containing historical background, the second containing the myths themselves. In Part One, rather than treating the histories of the given cultures and nations in isolation, I have attempted to give a sense of the interactions of all of the various groups in the region during given time periods. In Part Two, selected myths of the Middle East are retold against the background of Part One, that is, in the context of history, geography, language, and religion.

The ancient cultures covered here include those of Egypt, Mesopotamia (the Sumerians, Elamites, and Kassites, the Semitic Akkadians, Amorites, Babylonians, Mesopotamian Hurrians, and Assyrians), the Anatolian Hurrians and Hittites, and the Western Semitic peoples living in lands known at various times as a whole or in part as Canaan, Palestine, Phoenicia, Aram, Israel, Judah, and Samaria, with the addition of Arabia. Also considered will be the stories of Christianity and Islam, the two modern religions that, with Judaism, have their sources in the area in question. The mythology of pre-Islamic Iran is not fully included here, as it seems more in tune with the religious traditions of Vedic India than with those of the Middle East.

Given the particular importance of the region to political, economic, and religious questions of the present day, the mythologies of the ancient people of the Middle East will sometimes suggest comparisons with current situations. The events and stories under consideration here cannot be reasonably separated from the recent history of the part of the world that includes modern-day Iraq, Turkey, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Yemen, the Gulf states, and Saudi Arabia. The Middle East today is a battleground for the struggle between major nationalized religious traditions, particularly Israeli Jew and Arab Muslim (with significant Western Christian participation). The sources of this struggle can be traced in part to ancient antagonisms in the region, particularly between closely related Semites, and specifically to mythologies that have evolved there in various religious and national contexts since prehistory.

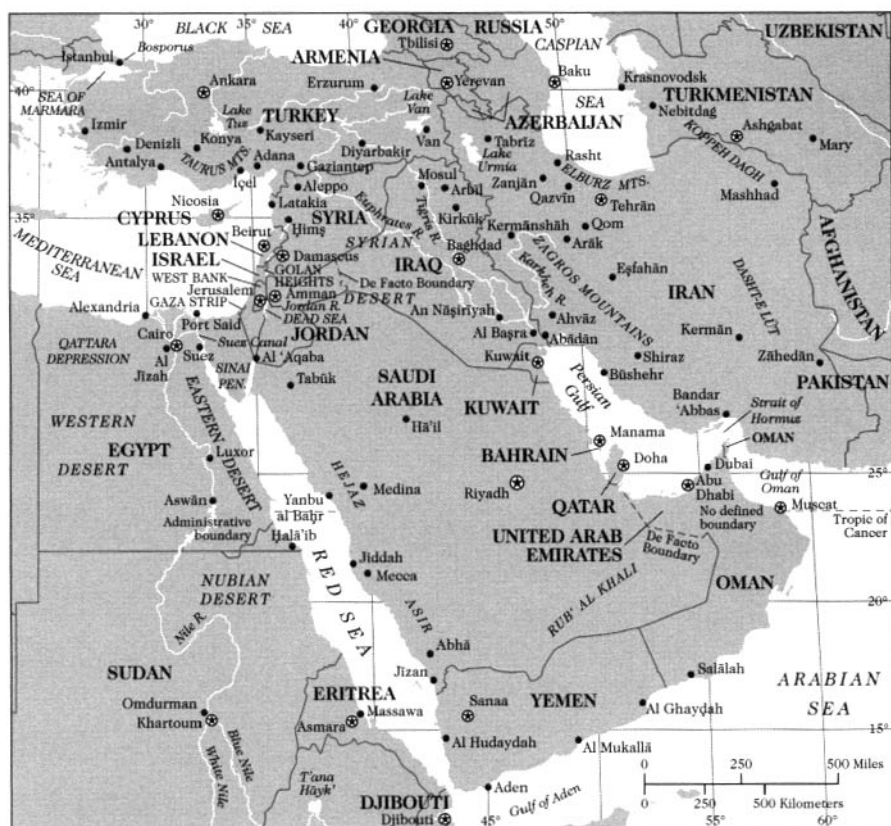
As always when discussing mythology, it is important to define terms. The myths collected and discussed here are for the most part *religious* narratives that transcend the possibilities of common experience and that express any given culture's literal or metaphorical un-

derstanding of various aspects of reality. In this sense myths have to do with the relation of the culture, or of human beings in general, to the unknown in the cosmos. To so-called fundamentalists of any given culture the religious stories of that culture are literally true, while stories of other cultures and religions are understood to be mere folklore—what in common usage we in fact mean by “myth.” For others, both within given cultures and outside of them, myths are seen as important metaphorical constructs reflecting understandings that cannot be expressed in any other way. For many mythologists these literally false stories are “true” in the sense that they form an actual, real part of any culture’s identity. What are Hopis without the kachina myths, the ancient Norse people without Odin, the Greeks without the deeds of Apollo, Dionysos, and Odysseus, the Jews without Yahweh’s covenant, the Christians without the resurrection? Understood in this way, it is possible to speak of the “myths” of the three monotheistic Abrahamic religions just as we speak of the “myths” of the ancient peoples whose sacred stories are no longer treated as the scripture of viable religions. The Hebrew story of the parting of the Sea of Reeds or the Christian story of the resurrection of Jesus are myths to Hindus, as is the Zuni creation story to Christians or the concept of Brahman to Jews. But with nonexclusionary vision, other people’s religious narratives can be seen as tribe-defining cultural dreams and as significant metaphors that can speak truthfully to people across cultural and sectarian boundaries.

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Part One

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND



The Middle East Today



Prehistory

The Paleolithic Age

As is the case with other parts of the world, the emergence of the human species in the Middle East is difficult to establish. There are archeological indications—primarily rough stone tools and skeletal remains—of the presence of an early hominid species (*Homo erectus*) in the area dating from at least 300,000 B.C.E., the period known as the lower (early) Paleolithic (Old Stone Age, c. 2 million–100,000 B.C.E.—geologically the Ice Age or the Pleistocene). These people would have been nomadic hunter-gatherers. Crude stone carvings indicate a possible mythological or religious consciousness. But it is not until the Middle Paleolithic (c. 100,000–30,000 B.C.E.) that we find Middle Eastern evidence of a hominid species—in this case so-called Neanderthal man—who was clearly moving in the direction of the kind of activity that would characterize later humans. In the archeological site of Shanidar in Iraq, for instance, graves contain bodies that appear to have been positioned ritualistically, indicating, at the very least, a sense of community responsibility that stands in opposition to the popular image of the “caveman.” Neanderthal man remained, however, like his predecessor, a hunter-gatherer, of whom we know relatively little, and in any case by about 30,000 B.C.E. Neanderthals had been displaced in the area by our own hominid subspecies, *Homo sapiens*, who first arrived in the Middle East perhaps as

early as 90,000 B.C.E. During the Upper or Late Paleolithic (c. 30,000–10,000 B.C.E.), these humans made significant strides toward the civilizations that would develop in future millennia. Excavations such as those at Kom Ombo and Jebel Sahaba in Egypt reveal a relatively sophisticated tool and weapon industry and clearly ritualistic burial practices. The rapid expansion of the Sahara, perhaps associated with the long drought brought about by a cold spell 1,000–1,300 years long (the so-called Younger Dryas, about 12,000 years ago), seems to have forced people to remain for long periods near the Nile River, thus causing the building of more or less permanent settlements. The drought in question affected the entire region of the eastern Mediterranean, in fact, and made necessary certain changes in the old hunter-gatherer cultures. The emergence in the Levant of agriculture and settlements and still more sophisticated toolmaking mark a transitional period from the Paleolithic to the Neolithic (New Stone Age) known as the Mesolithic (Middle Stone Age) or Epipaleolithic or Proto-Neolithic (c. 10,000–8,000 B.C.E., depending upon the location). During this period hunting and gathering remained the dominant sources of food, but agricultural practices were gradually developed, as were the storage of food, the beginning of the domestication of animals, and the building of more complex permanent settlements that were, in effect, the precursors of the truly permanent settlements of the great cultures that would emerge in the Neolithic Age (c. 8000–3000 B.C.E.).

Natufian Culture

Central to the Mesolithic development in the Middle East was the Natufian culture, so named after a site north of Jerusalem. Natufian settlements for between 100 and 150 people were scattered throughout the Mesolithic Middle East. Among the best known of these are Tell ("mound" in Arabic) Mureybet in the upper Euphrates Valley (in modern Syria), Hayonim (in modern Israel), and Tell es-Sultan (near Jericho in modern Palestine). An element of particular interest in the Natufian culture is the apparent establishment of protosettlements even before the period of the Younger Dryas—that is to say, before the necessary advent of primitive agriculture. An example of such a settlement is Tell Abu Hureyra, near Lake Assad in modern Syria,

which was populated from c. 10,500 B.C.E. and which appears not to have cultivated grain until some 450 years later. Tell es-Sultan, a Natufian site near Jericho, also seems to have been settled before the development of agriculture. The urge to settle in one place may have been the result of abundant wild food resources in the immediate area. Tell Abu Hureyra and other Natufian settlements were abandoned late in the Mesolithic period, perhaps because of overutilization of resources or intertribal violence. When Tell Abu Hureyra was reestablished, it was one of the many examples of what has come to be known as the "Neolithic Revolution."

The Neolithic Revolution

Revolution is perhaps not the best word to attach to a process that was gradual rather than instantaneous. Still, the changes that occurred during the period in question (8000–3000 B.C.E.) are comparable to other periods of radical change such as the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century or the current technological revolution. What had happened in the Middle East by the end of the Neolithic was a radical change from a life based on hunting and gathering to one centered primarily on agriculture, animal husbandry, and community living based on civil and religious law and ritual, with accompanying mythology. Along with these changes came technological improvements in weaponry and tools, the development of pottery to store grains, and bricks to build houses.

The Neolithic period in the Middle East saw the domestication of sheep in northern Mesopotamia by 8000 B.C.E. and the cultivation of grains in Palestine and Anatolia during the eighth and seventh millennia B.C.E. Over the centuries the variety of grains and domesticated animals grew, as did the size of settlements. There are indications that cult centers developed at Jericho and in Mureybet and Çayonu in the Euphrates Valley as well as in Hacilar and Çatal Hüyük in Anatolia.

The Neolithic Cultures

One result of the Neolithic revolution was the establishment during the fourth millennium B.C.E. of cities—as opposed to the family-clan

villages or towns of the Neolithic—beginning in southern Mesopotamia. This was an age in which not only did farming develop, but much more sophisticated metal tools and weapons replaced implements of wood and stone. An insufficiency of rainfall necessitated a strong government that could organize irrigation and other specialized activities involved in the highly interactive living of a relatively large population. The integrative aspect of the early cities was accentuated by surrounding walls meant to delineate boundaries and to protect against invaders. And organized religions with temples, a priestly caste, and highly developed mythologies provided further rationale for the existence of even larger city-states. In effect, these early cities and city-states were the foundation for what would become the religious or myth-based nationalism that is still so much a part of human life.

The Ubaid and Sumerians

The people who developed the first great cities were the people of Kengir, now southern Iraq. Their later Semitic conquerors called their land Sumer, and we know of them as the Sumerians. The Sumerians, whose origins are a mystery, were unrelated to the Semites, who would eventually conquer them. They probably arrived in Mesopotamia from Central Asia in the fourth millennium B.C.E. (Wolkstein and Kramer, 116) and mixed with other non-Semitic people, called Ubaid, who had been there from at least the fifth millennium B.C.E. The Ubaid are so called for Tell Ubaid, near the ruins of the ancient city of Ur. It was the Ubaid culture that first established protocities along the marshland of what is now southern Iraq. These settlements included what became the Sumerian cities of Ur, Eridu, Adab, Isin, Larsa, Lagash, Nippur, and Unug (better known by its later Semitic name, Uruk or Erech). The Ubaid were skilled at farming, animal husbandry, pottery, and other crafts.

The period immediately following the Ubaid is generally called the Early and Middle Uruk periods (c. 4000–3500 B.C.E.). By then nomadic Semitic tribes from the northwest and Arabia had mingled with and gained considerable influence over Ubaid. Then came Sumerian dominance in the so-called Protoliterate and Late Uruk