

## Introduction

The activating element of spirituality was likely the sensation that specific forces of Nature surpassed human understanding. The turmoil stemming from the inability to grasp their essence may have prompted members of the *Homo* genus, at a disregarded evolutionary stage in the lineage leading to us, to adopt a posture of submission towards them.

Later, *Homo sapiens* would have materialized places believed to reflect the Indescribable through signs or objects. Initially, these simple receptacles were quickly mistaken for Power sources. Though when art could give form to this exaltation of the Sacred, the container would have become an idol.

Then, over time, gestures of subjection, oral imploration, or sacrifice, primarily a means of protection against confusion regarding the Unintelligible, would have been perceived as a kind of trading; the genuflection, prayer, or offering lost their exorcist character and became a bargaining chip for obtaining benefits.

During the last ice age, approximately 70,000 to 12,000 years ago, an arid climate prevailed in the Near East, while an ice sheet covered the northern half of Europe. Between 12,000 and 10,000 years ago, deglaciation and the shift in rainfall patterns due to global warming led to a radical transformation in the distribution of flora and fauna. Gradually, the near-constant availability of food resources, including drinking water and edible plants, drove humans, who had before relied on hunting, scavenging, gathering, and foraging for sustenance, to reduce their travel. The training of wild cereals and some animal species led to their sedentarisation.

During the Neolithic period, after 10000, the advancement of agriculture led sedentary people to discover the soil's powers and gradually perceive the Earth as an entity. In the imagination of shamans, the Earth's limbs, bones, organs, and moods transformed into mountains, stones, plants, and rivers. The divinities had not yet emerged from human speculation. Mother Earth was regarded

as the originator of all things. This intellection lacks evidence, but its echoes will later appear in numerous mythological narratives.

Thus, in the Greek myth of the Deluge narrated by Ovid in the *Metamorphoses*, after the waters receded, Deucalion and his wife, Pyrrha, received an order from the goddess Themis to throw their grandmother's bones behind them. They were initially perplexed, but they realized that their grandmother was none other than the Earth and its bones, the stones. They picked them up and threw them behind them. Deucalion's stones were changed into men and Pyrrha's into women as soon as they touched the ground.

In the story of Orion's birth, also recounted by Ovid in *Fasti*, Jupiter, Neptune, and Mercury disguised themselves as travelers and visited Hyrieus, a poor farmer who longed for children. Hyrieus welcomed them, even going so far as to sacrifice an entire ox. At the end of the meal, Jupiter revealed his divinity and invited their host to make a wish.

– Being a father without being a husband, said Hyrieus.

The gods departed, stained the skin of the ox they had eaten with their sperm, and then buried it. After a nine-month gestation into Mother Earth, Orion emerged from the skin.

In Persian mythology (*Bundahishn*), the god Ohrmazd created Gayomard, a hermaphroditic being. One day, the demon Ahriman assaulted Gayomard and killed him. In his dying moments, he spread his seminal fluid on the ground, from which a rhubarb sprang up. Some explained the bloody color of the rhubarb's stalk by saying that Gayomard's blood still coursed through this vegetable. Later, the plant gave birth to Mashya and Mashyana, whose lineage is said to have founded humanity.

In these myths, each human being is *autókhthônos* (from the Greek *autós*, «oneself» and *khthón*, «earth»), meaning they are freely born from the ground. Later, other traditions will attribute the formation of humankind to a potter god, but this divinity will always utilize Mother Earth's clay to shape man.

In the minds of sedentary people at that time, Mother Earth was the dispenser of life. She nourished humans by producing edible plants with the assistance of the fertilizing rain provided by Father Sky. Besides, humans accessed civilization through the metals she concealed in her depths. They uttered thanks for these gifts. They cherished her and created rituals to seek her favors.

Towards the end of the Neolithic era, one conceptualized Father Sky and Mother Earth; the former in the guise of the Mighty Bull, the male generative principle, and the latter as the Buxom Woman with pronounced sexual attributes. They were not yet gods (there has never been a trace of worship dedicated to them) but relatively simple hypostases of the vital energy of nature and fecundity<sup>1</sup>. Both were already evident in the Paleolithic era, although their symbolism was unclear. The Bull, an auroch, was black, enormous, muscular, and virile. One envisioned the Buxom Woman as the ideal breeding female, accentuated by the fatty development of her chest and hips (steatopygia).

During the subsequent millennia, a gradual shift from the spiritual to the religious occurred, primarily connected to the mystery of plants' germination and annual regeneration. Entities conducive to agriculture gained significance. Human physical traits began to embellish them, particularly those of the Bull, which had already partially lost their original meanings through neglect. One was delighted to grant this new male entity a consort, a callipygian Venus adorned with more elegant finery.

Around 3500, two significant sites of civilization emerged at either end of the Fertile Crescent, one in Egypt, along the banks of the Nile, and another in Sumer, present-day Iraq, situated between the parallel courses of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The availability of favorable elements for agriculture, such as proximity to water and a mild climate, encouraged groups of previously nomadic populations, arriving in Egypt from the Sahara and the Levant, and in Mesopotamia from Syria and the southern Persian Gulf, to settle in these lush alluvial regions.

To the west, Mesopotamia (from the Greek *meso*, «between», and *potamos*, «river») could not have existed without the Tigris and the Euphrates. For millennia, these rivers, born in the mountains of Armenia, made the steppe flourish and mature between their parallel courses, creating a camaieu of cultivated fields that the Sumerian fellah tilled at the slow step of his ox. This land of abundance, always coveted and constantly invaded, was seized by Akkadians, Amorites, Kassites, Persians, Macedonians, Romans, and Arabs. In the northwest, the high Tigris Basin gave

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<sup>1</sup> Worship consists of a series of regulated practices designed to pay tribute to a divine being or one regarded as such, or to a sacred phenomenon.

rise to Assyria, a mountainous region that borders Armenia. To the southeast, the Euphrates plain gave rise to Babylonia, whose southern portion was the Sumerian homeland, the place of origin of which remains unknown.



**FIGURE 1 - THE FERTILE CRESCENT**

At the other tip of the Fertile Crescent, Egypt would also have been a desert without its nourishing river. Indeed, its habitable area was limited to a narrow strip of cultivable land stretching over 800 km along the Nile, concluding in a vast delta that opens to the Mediterranean Sea. Isolated by the arid expanses surrounding it, Egypt was, unlike Mesopotamia, shielded from invasions, letting its civilization and way of life experience little change over three millennia. Most of his population lived in rhythm with the river's floods, which varied in magnitude but were consistently punctual, arriving in mid-July during the dry season. The people equated this phenomenon to a miraculous divine action.

While Egyptians trusted their gods, Sumerians feared them. In Sumer, existence was more arduous, subject to the vagaries of two rivers with unpredictable flows and damaging runoffs. It gave rise

to a pessimistic religion composed of violent and destructive gods. Open to the invasions of its neighbors, Sumer's culture had the chance to be enriched by them each time.

Egypt rapidly evolved from local chiefdoms into two distinct kingdoms and then into a nation – the first in history. Meanwhile, Mesopotamia comprised an assortment of antagonistic city-states that experienced a spectacular rise and then collapsed.

Trade and cultural relations rapidly developed between the early Egyptian dynasties and the first Sumerian ones, passing through the fertile regions of the Canaanite plain, Syria, and Cappadocia. The expansion in social contacts, combined with the tendency of religions to interpenetrate, fostered the development of new speculations, which, soon, the mastery of writing saved in the form of mythological literature. Surrounding populations drew from it plentifully.

Now, let us jump two millennia to find ourselves in the Levant shortly after the onset of Iron I, ca. 1150.

Pharaonic Egypt had known its greatness and began its decline, interspersed with ephemeral revivals. The Sumerian culture faded away, plagued by more hostile peoples. The kingdoms of Crete, Cyprus, Hatti, and a host of small city-states of the Canaanite plains collapsed under the invasions of the «Sea Peoples».

The disappearance of the pharaohs from the global stage facilitated the emergence of a new geopolitical world centered on the civilization of the Levant. Aramaic, Phoenician, and Philistine kingdoms swiftly supplanted the ancient city-states in the plains. At the same time, mixed population groups with little connection to regional languages and ancient values emerged in the highlands that separate Canaan from the Jordan Valley. A combination of unclear factors compelled them to migrate, including insecurity, overpopulation, the disintegration of institutions, and the erosion of social structures. Over time, people of the northern Highlands transitioned from skirmishes to pitched battles and from fleeting alliances to local chiefdoms. They rallied around the center of Shechem, while those from the south congregated around Hebron.

Food prohibitions defined these individuals. The foremost being the non-consumption of pork and the blood of slaughtered animals. One often believes that these restrictions stem from prophylactic concerns. It is a misconception: the surrounding people routinely consumed pork despite it was as pathogenic in

their land as elsewhere. In truth, the people of the Highlands believed that by abstaining from pork, they protected themselves from the adverse effects of the malevolent spiritual forces they believed the Suidae embodied. Similarly, the intake of blood, regarded as the seat of the soul of both animals and humans, was banned to prevent the introduction of a foreign spirit into oneself.

The northern territorial entity, composed of hills and verdant valleys, soon became rich through farming. Rapidly, the habitat densified to accommodate an estimated 40,000 individuals. They revered an Areopagus of Canaanite divine powers, the Elim (‘ilm). Later, they summarized this local pantheon into a unique entity whose name curiously retains a plural ending, Elohim (‘ēlōhîm). This name, used as a theonym, was a plural masculine substantive meaning «the gods».

Ten times less populated than the North, the southern entity was less productive, consisting of garrigues, maquis, and arid escarpments. The villages remained small, and most of the population was engaged in enclosed nomadism. The majority revered cosmic deities, such as the Sun (*šemeš*), the Moon (*yārāḥ*), and the Queen of Heaven (*milkāh* or *malkatu*), which was a reference to the planet Venus. Contrary to long-held beliefs, the inhabitants of ancient Jerusalem and its small surrounding villages were not yet familiar with Yahweh (*yahweh*), who would emerge two or three centuries later.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, while the low-lying Canaanite plains and the Levantine coast remained under the control of local elites who ruled over farmers, herders, fishermen, and artisans, the two upland confederations evolved into two distinct kingdoms. The northern one adopted the name Israel (*yīsrā’ēl*), and its main town shifted from the small Shechem to the opulent Samaria. The southern kingdom, which had now chosen the city of Jerusalem as its capital, took on the name Judah (*yahūdāh*). Although their inhabitants’ customs and religious practices were almost identical, these two kingdoms existed in constant disputes instead of uniting, rendering them vulnerable to neighboring empires.

Around 735, the Assyrians arrived, attracted by the Levantine coast, the gateway for sea and caravan routes originating from regions where prosperous civilizations flourished. These shrewd traders, led by a military aristocracy that was both devout and pragmatic, crushed the Damascus Aramean kingdom and the

Israelite monarchy. Only the tiny kingdom of Judah retained relative freedom due to its distance, poverty, and the insight of its king, Ahaz.

The invaded kingdoms, however, soon baulked under the yoke. The Assyrians immediately destroyed the Aramean kingdom of Damascus. Israel, for its part, has attempted to disengage itself from foreign tutelage by allying with Egypt in 725. This action triggered a new Assyrian intervention. Emperor Shalmaneser V imposed a complete blockade on Samaria. Three years later, the town ceded due to harsh restrictions. His successor, Sargon II, imprisoned the Israelite king, Hoshea, for the remainder of his life in Assyria, and then deported the Samaritan elites and part of the population to Upper Mesopotamia, where the local populations assimilated them<sup>2</sup>.

Thus, the prosperous kingdom of Israel vanished after nearly two hundred years of existence. Consequently, the tiny kingdom of Judah found itself alone before the Assyrian ogre. However, as it did not participate in the rebellion, it was spared and could begin to experience life as a subservient nation. It then appropriated the history of its former enemy, adopting the folklore and sacred texts that many Israelite refugees, who had fled the Assyrian advance in 725, had brought with them. Under the auspices of the *Pax Assyriaca*, the Judean idea of the deity began to distinguish itself from the ancient Canaanite system, infusing Assur's ideology. Various religious factions then sought to elevate the Jerusalemite god, Yahweh, to the status of the nation's protector. However, most Judean monarchs were reluctant to agree to this concept, opting instead for a religious syncretism to promote the good governance of the heterogeneous peoples subject to their rule.

Aside from King Hezekiah's (727-698) unsuccessful revolt, which resulted in the invasion and destruction of half his kingdom by the Assyrian Emperor Sennacherib, Jerusalem remained loyal to its overlord. During the long reign of Manasseh (698-642), Judah's greatest king, the ascendancy of Ashshur continued to grow to the extent that the worship of Assyrian deities would finally be introduced into the Temple of Jerusalem. According to the *Ascension of Isaiah*, the prophet Isaiah purportedly reproved

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<sup>2</sup> About these «ten lost tribes», see. Paul 2000, 372-374.

the king with such bitterness that he was put to death, locked into a hollow tree that his tormentors sawed in two parts.

Assyria and its vast empire collapsed a century later under the combined assaults of the Medes and Babylonians. Immediately, Nabopolassar, king of Babylon, seized the territories of the Levant with the swagger of a victor. The disappointment of the Judaeen kingdom, which fell from Charybdis to Scylla, was immense. It weighed so heavily that it led them to make the same foolish mistake that Israel had done one hundred and thirty-five years earlier. Around 597, playing his part, King Jehoiachin placed himself under the illusory protection of Pharaoh Necho II and refused to pay tribute to his Babylonian overlord. No longer in need of Nebuchadnezzar II, the presumptive heir to the throne of Babylon, arrived at the head of a large army corps. Necho II soon proved a failing ally, and Jehoiachin had to lay down his arms to avoid the sack of his capital. This surrender saved his life but resulted in his deportation, along with that of the royal family and a contingent of dignitaries. The Babylonians replaced Jehoiachin with his uncle Zedekiah.

Rather than serving as a lesson for the few remaining Judaeen elites, this calamity merely compelled them to resist even more. A decade later, around 587, a new insurrection erupted with even more tragic outcomes. This time, the Babylonians plundered the town and set it on fire. They demolished its surrounding walls, set fire to Yahweh's Temple, and confiscated the objects of worship. As for King Zedekiah, deemed a traitor, he was displayed publicly, forced to observe the slaughter of his entire family, before one gouged his eyes out. He was then chained to a chariot like a dog and deported alongside a new group of insurgents. Probably, he did not arrive alive in Babylonia.

The literary collection that would become the Biblical text ought to have concluded there. The documents that had facilitated its development should have fallen into pieces, stifling Judaism's future at its inception. Indeed, seeing a fixed shape, the Judaeen god's double defeat beneath the Babylonian one was likely to result in the abandonment of his cult. Since the Temple, the only sanctuary recognized as the place of Yahweh's displays, lies in ruins, this veneration has lost its justification for existence.

Nevertheless, everything continued. If the Israelites, relegated to Mesopotamia by Sargon II around 722, failed to maintain their



identity and merged into the local population, the Judaeans exiled to Babylonia managed to retain their own for 125 years, devoting themselves to record the traditions that sustained their faith.

The neo-Babylonian apogee shone only briefly. In 539, the Persian Emperor Cyrus II overthrew the «colossus with feet of clay»<sup>3</sup> weakened by Nebuchadnezzar's feeble heirs.

With the Persians, things changed. However, let there be no mistake, their foreign policy, much lauded for its respect towards the religions and customs of the populations under their control, was more considered by tactical cunning than enduring empathy. These Judaeans, who appeared to be the focus of their courteous attention for the moment, are the residents of a newly established province of the Persian Empire, whose southern border adjoins that scheming Egypt, which Cyrus openly wishes to subdue and conquer. It was for this reason that, around 538, one year after the fall of Babylon, Cyrus permitted the exiles to return to Jerusalem to rebuild their Temple, even restoring to them the objects of worship and the treasures seized by Nebuchadnezzar.

It was these uprooted people, who suddenly arrived in a country where they were unborn after seventy years of exile in Babylon, who forged the Bible as we know it. In their hearts of hearts, if their ancestors had known the disgrace and horror of banishment in a foreign land, it was because their god wanted it. And if their god wanted it, it was because of faults against him. Similarly, the Babylonians likened the fall of their empire to a punishment inflicted by Marduk on their last king, Nabonidus, whose exaggerated devotion to Šin, the lunar god, had kept him away from state affairs and led him to be considered an apostate<sup>4</sup>. However, already before, in the 22<sup>nd</sup> century, the *Curse of Akkad* stated that the fall of the Akkadian Empire was due to Enlil's anger towards Naram-Sin's impiety.

Then, these new Judaeans, selecting from a florilegium of legends, annals, and texts from various genres – philosophical, religious, prophetic, legislative, poetic, and erotic – transcoded this jumble, according to their misfortune, and placed the spiritual ideas of their time onto a mythical past. In their wild quest for

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<sup>3</sup> Daniel 2:31-46

<sup>4</sup> Regarding this false imputation, see Soler 2004, 67 ff.

identity, they even imagined an ancestral group that never existed, the Hebrew people, shown as enduring endless wanderings.

In truth, the discovery and meticulous analysis of the remains of minor villages established on the heights of Judea and Samaria in the 11<sup>th</sup> century have proven that the Hebrews were not the invaders described in the books of Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, and Joshua. They were merely Canaanites. Thus, Canaanite religious patterns connected their worldview with their religious folklore. They were linked, via Assur and Babylon, to the mythology inherited by the Levant from Sumer and Akkad.

Therefore, it is unsurprising to discover analogies of Near Eastern myths in the foundational texts of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

## Tales of Beginnings and Fighting Traditions

### *Generalities*

Admitting the principle of creation would lead us to accept the revelation belief, as this prodigy could not have had any direct observer. The fact that it could only be realized once compels us to assert that the various relationships of this event, as revealed by the creator to his copyists, should be more or less faithful copies of a single narrative.

Why is it not so? Why do all traditions concerning creation, even if they share fundamental analogies, contradict one another? It is because creation is a myth; it demands imagination rather than rationale. It ignores the truth in favor of the credibility within the cultural context from which it arose.

The Prehistoric man, still unable to conceive of nothingness except in relation to his environment, first imagined that chaos had preceded the universe's birth. He envisioned this disorder as an inverted image of his stable, clear, noisy, restless, and warm world, like an impalpable, dark, silent, motionless, and cold antithesis of it. He depicted it as a liquid expanse.

The mythologem<sup>5</sup> of *primaeval waters* is attested worldwide, perhaps because no universal constituent can represent more chaos than water. Is this element tangible yet inconsistent, stable yet formless, but polymorphic?

The Sumerians believed that the primal elements were born spontaneously within a vast liquid expanse named Nammu, the Mother of all Gods. For the Babylonians, chaos was fluid and unplanned, consisting of a kind of cultural broth that, like in gestation, contained the future divine entities. At the other end of the Fertile Crescent, according to the theology of Heliopolis, the Egyptians viewed the primordial chaos (Nun) as akin to an infinite

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<sup>5</sup> A mythologem (from the Greek *muthologoumenôn*) is a fundamental element found in various myths; each myth is composed of an association of different mythologems.

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