

THE MYTHOLOGY OF PRE-ISRAELITE SHECHEM

BY

G. R. H. WRIGHT

Beirut

Concomitant with, and in part arising from, the current excavations at Shechem, there has been considerable scholarly research devoted to the topography of the ancient city¹⁾, that is to the identification and location of the various features which appear in the scriptural record. Whatever may have been its effect in clarifying biblical understanding, this research has had one result—as yet little marked. It has collected and emphasised the evidence of what can be called “The Mythology” of Shechem, for beneath the costume of their biblical “*personae*” these features are clearly to be recognised as pertaining to another, earlier, religious drama. Such religious transmutations are normal enough, indeed are a banality, but what distinguishes the Shechem circumstances and renders them worthy of report is the extraordinary completeness with which the evidence of the earlier “myth” has survived.

No one can fail to be impressed by some parallels manifested between historical Shechem and Delphi²⁾. Centrally situated in their respective regions, each is a natural place of solemn convocation and this centrality is underlined by the claim to be at “the navel of the earth”³⁾ Both are places where the divine purpose is made manifest. Shechem had its oak of divination⁴⁾ while the oracles of Apollo at Delphi were originally given in connection with his sacred tree⁵⁾.

¹⁾ The recent study of J. A. SOGGIN “Bemerkungen zur alttestamentlichen Topographie Sichems mit besonderen Bezug auf Jd 9” in *ZPPV* 83, 1967, pp. 183-198, gives the fullest references to similar literature.

²⁾ The literature on Delphi is endless; for useful compressed accounts v. DAREMBURG and SAGLIO, *Dictionnaire des Antiquités* IV pp. 197-200 (under Omphalos); PAULLY-WISSOWA *Real Encyclopädie* Supp. V, Cols. 61ff. PARKE and WORMELL *The Delphic Oracle* Oxford 1956 provides a reasonably brief, comprehensive survey. F. FONTENROSE, *Python*, Los Angeles 1959, is a discursive account of the comparative religion of some aspects of the Delphic myth.

³⁾ At Shechem v. Jdg ix 37 (SOGGIN, pp. 190 and 194, gives a commentary with references). The Omphalos was the most famous and generally accepted as the most primitive feature at Delphi, cf. PARKE and WORMELL, p. 6.

⁴⁾ v. Jdg. IX 37 (SOGGIN, pp. 190-1)

⁵⁾ This should be a Laurel or a Bay (cf. PARKE and WORMELL, pp. 11 and 25ff.)

Such points of resemblance could be extended, but in the first instance this may serve to draw attention to the possibility of some basic and wide-spread "myth" lying behind the assemblage of features at Shechem which posterity deemed worthy of notice.

To outline this myth is not easy since it is a configuration of the central facts of experience—creation and destruction, life and death, reality and unreality with the eternal cycle thereof. Thus there are unlimited variations and interconnections to what follows, and the ideas may be and are given variously a cosmic, an ethic or a mystic understanding.

At the centre whence proceeded the creation out of chaos of the three worlds, was established a garden itself centering around a tree which grew by or out of the "navel" of all things where ordinary space and time became of a different order ¹⁾. This tree which gives knowledge and power over life and death is the axis of intercommunication between the three divided worlds. It is the tree of life irrigated by the waters of life and is, or ought to be, to property of a divine man-king (a good shepherd or gardener) who tends the tree in the interest of mankind (and is himself a manifestation of the tree).

This myth is, of course, the "paradise garden" myth of creation commonly associated with Eden. Various elements or echoes of it are, however, encountered, from one end of the ancient world to another, be it in Delphi, Eridu ²⁾, Buddhaghaya ³⁾, Jerusalem or New Jerusalem ⁴⁾, and it is submitted that likewise the religious memorials at Shechem reflect some aspects of this myth.

Before seeking to interpret the Shechem evidence in this light, it is advisable to survey in brief the concepts (or symbols) concerned, and to limit so far as possible their associations to the purpose in hand, for the ramifications of these associations are almost infinite. With the creation itself resulting from the victorious combat with and dismemberment of the chaos monster there is nothing of concern at Shechem; and this question may be deleted from the discussion. Nor is there any presumption to reckon with the persons involved, creators,

¹⁾ cf. The Pythia's interesting claim that to her all time and space were one.

²⁾ Eridu is the Sumerian prototype of the biblical Eden, its paradise legend has been considered many times; cf. W. F. ALLBRIGHT "the Mouth of the Rivers", *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literature* 35, 1919, pp. 161-195.

³⁾ The enlightenment of the Buddha under the historical "Bo" Tree near Buddh Gaya is the crucial article of Buddhist belief and this tree is very definitely presented as the Tree of Life at the Centre of the World, cf. (for convenience) A. COOMERASWAMY, *Elements of Buddhist Iconography*, Harvard 1935.

⁴⁾ cf. Rev. xxii 1-2.

V
5
J
A
W
ib
R.
ib
mc
ide
4
S. I

divine kings etc.—although it is not impossible that an authoritative scholar in this field might seek so to do ¹⁾. It follows that the relevant mythical concepts resolve themselves into the tree of life and the water of life set in the vicinity of the navel of the earth. These religious symbols or ideas are well known and well studied and it would be an affectation to seek here to redocument them from primary sources; indeed there can be found developments in any manual or handbook of the outline of them given here.

The “navel of the earth” ²⁾ is a figure of understanding common to almost all peoples. The various Indo-European terms “navel, omphalos, umbilicus etc are derived from the one root (cf. Sanskrit NĀBHI) signifying swelling or protuberance, thus the idea connotes literally or figuratively a mountain; the Semitic term *tābbūr* ³⁾, likewise can be understood as mountain. This eminence marks the point of departure and the point of arrival about which all things turn and return. It is of equal valency both with birth and death which here become one as reality in its most concentrated aspect is manifested and apprehended. And where reality is found most concentrated that is truly the centre of the real world. Thus it can be seen that many centres are this centre; indeed every holy place of ultimate revelation is such a centre and has been understood so, however some such places have gained general recognition and Shechem by the Sacred Mountain Gerizim is one.

The Tree of Life ⁴⁾ in turn expresses the eternal recurrence of this

¹⁾ By identifying figures in the patriarchal sagas of Shechem as old Canaanite Gods.

²⁾ The following literature gives some idea of this concept:

A. J. WENSINCK, *The Ideas of the Western Semites concerning the Navel of the Earth*, Amsterdam 1916.

The Labyrinth (ed. S. HOOKE), London 1935, pp. 45-70.

W. ROBERTSON SMITH, *The Religion of the Semites*, London, 1927, pp. 200ff and 568ff.

J. HARRISON, *Themis*, Cambridge, 1927, pp. 396ff.

A. B. COOKE, *Zeus II*, Cambridge 1925 pp. 169ff.

W. ROSCHER, *Omphalos*, Saxony 1913.

ibid. Neue Omphalos Studien, Saxony 1915.

ibid. Der Omphalos Gedanke bei verschiedenen Völkern, Leipzig, 1918.

R. MERINGER, “Omphalos, Nabel, Nebel,” (*Wörter und Sachen*, V 1913 pp. 41-91).

ibid. “Zur Roschers Omphalos (*ibid.* VI, 1914)

³⁾ Mt Tabor in Galilee was such a central mountain, one of the places in mediaeval legend where the wood of the Eden tree was transplanted, and early identified as the site of Christ’s passage from a human to a divine sphere.

⁴⁾ V. E. O. JAMES, *The Tree of Life*, Leiden 1966.

S. LANGDON, *Semitic Mythology*, Boston 1931 *pass.*

central experience, where the knowledge of life and death achieves to a power beyond life and death. This "process" extends from the underworld to the astral world (the sub-conscious to the super-conscious) and is the axis on which all turns. The tree can be shown as a rood, a stock or a pillar, further this symbol of the eternal periodicity of regeneration is often complemented by the association of its counterpart in stone¹⁾—the symbol of the other aspect of the eternal, that which endures unchanged through all changing. Such a tree is one tree in many and many trees in one, and again all arboreal figures of the rejuvenating power of nature can be and had been understood as the Tree of Life, but inevitably some instances are specially famous²⁾.

Eternally fecundating, purifying and rejuvenating the tree are the waters of life³⁾, the rivers of paradise, the fountain of youth, ("strong-waters", burnt-wine, whiskey in too human analogy⁴⁾. These streams of refreshment for deathly thirst bring all things to birth and rebirth⁵⁾. Springs, wells, streams are sacred everywhere and water is an element in every important ritual; without which no operating sanctuary could function.⁶⁾

Such in outline are the components of the Sacred High Place, micro-cosmic landscape, *imago mundi*, of tree, stone and water. A landscape pictured so well to medieval Christians in the rock of Golgotha at the centre of the world where, on the grave of Adam—with the manifest skull thereof, was raised up the Cross, grown from

H. BERGEMA, *De Boom des Levens in Schrift en Historie*, Hilversum, 1938.

U. HOLMBERG, *Der Baum des Lebens*, Helsinki 1922.

G. WIDENGREN, *The King and the Tree of Life in Ancient Near Eastern Religion*, Uppsala 1951.

N. PARROT, *Les Représentations de l'arbre Sacré sur les Monuments de Mesopotamie et d'Elam*, Paris 1937.

H. DANTHINE, *Le Palmier-Dattier et les Arbres Sacrés dans l'Iconographie de l'Asie Occidentale Ancienne*, Paris 1937.

G. LECHER, "The Tree of Life in European and Islamic Cultures" *Ars Islamica* IV 1937 pp. 369-416. (Inconsequential argument but convenient documentation).

¹⁾ cf. A. EVANS, "Mycenaean Tree and Pillar Cults" *Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 1901, pp. 99-203, for specific reference to Semitic cults, v. pp. 130ff.

²⁾ e. g. The *kisḫanu* tree at Eridu v. S. LANGDON "The Legend of the *Kisḫanu*", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1928 pp. 843-848.

³⁾ v., e.g. E. W. HOPKINS, "The Fountain of Youth", *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 26, 1905, pp. 1:67; A. WÜNSCHE, *Die Sagen vom Lebensbaum und Lebenswasser. Altorientalische Mythen*, Leipzig 1905.

⁴⁾ Whiskey is exactly eau-de-vie in Gaelic.

⁵⁾ cf. the rites of *refrigerium* and Baptism.

⁶⁾ cf. The stoup and font of a Christian church.

the Eden Tree. And all the while springs of living water gushed forth as the eternal drama of renewal was enacted ¹⁾. That in the days before the Bible all these religious properties were possessed in high renown at Shechem, the Bible itself bears record ²⁾.

The city of Shechem was located by the "Navel of the Earth" (Jdg ix 37). That this phrase has some reference to the Holy Mountain Gerizim, the highest mountain in the world, the mountain never inundated by the flood, can hardly be doubted ³⁾. Its eminently central position, Samaritan tradition continuing to this day, and the specific adverting to this tradition in John iv all combine to invest Mt Gerizim with the appropriate, transcendental character. Further the biblical account of the arrival of the people in the land emphasises the compulsion that was felt to have the sacrament of the revelation on Mt. Sinaï (Horeb) immediately projected by mimesis onto Mt Gerizim ⁴⁾. In Canaan Gerizim was traditionally the Holy Mountain of intercommunication between human and divine nature and in this character there could be no question of supplanting it because of casual, historical events—the timeless fact had to be solemnly confirmed.

However, that the "navel of the earth" near Shechem means exclusively the mountain or part of the mountain of Gerizim is not certain ⁵⁾. The context of Jdg ix 37 strongly suggests for the "navel" a limited emplacement, a monument or object in apposition to the other object referred to in connection with the precise intelligence of troop movements. Further it is not far removed from the Shechem Gate. The companies have descended from the mountain heights (where they were shadowy) and are now at hand and clear to see converging from this point and that. Thus it is very likely that as at Delphi, some feature (stone object) was exhibited as the symbol of the cosmic omphalos.

¹⁾ This mediaeval tradition, so familiar from illustrations, is to be found expressed in such "works" as *The Apocalypse of Moses*, *The Gospel of Nicodemus*, *The Life of Adam and Eve*. v. (for convenience) A. GRAF, *Miti leggende e superstizione de Medio Evo*, Turin 1925 pp. 59ff.; A. S. RAPPAPORT, *Mediaeval Legends of Christ*, New York 1935.

²⁾ In the books of Genesis, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges and the Gospel according to St. John.

³⁾ v. (c.g.) B. W. ANDERSON, "The Place of Shechem in the Bible," *Biblical Archaeologist*, XX, 1957, pp. 10-11, and SOGGIN p. 190.

⁴⁾ v. Deut xi 26-32; xxvii 1-2; Josh viii 30-36; xxiv 25-28

⁵⁾ v. SOGGIN, p. 190

Were the chthonic, funerary associations of the omphalos emphasised by the proximity of a tomb? At Delphi the Tomb of Dionysos redoubled this significance of the Omphalos itself, which was generally recognised as marking the grave of Python¹⁾. Did the "Tomb of Joseph" serve the same purpose at Shechem? The Bible gives no circumstantial explanation of how or why the patriarch came to appropriate this notable tomb²⁾.

Trees are remarked throughout the Old Testament as a natural association for memorialising events of the spirit but at no other locality is this insistence on "The Tree" comparable with that at Shechem³⁾. All sanctuaries may have had their "Tree" but the Tree at Shechem was of outstanding note⁴⁾. That this Sacred Tree at Shechem, had several aspects and different manifestations is at any one time perfectly possible (and certain over a passage of time). Two apparently physically separate trees are adduced for Eden, and both Zeus and Appollo had their tree at Delphi. The various scriptural references to the Tree at Shechem likewise probably can be resolved into "personalities" but this will have little bearing on the fundamentals of the mythology⁵⁾.

The "Tree" at Shechem, as all sacred trees, symbolises the power of cyclic regeneration or renewal inherent in "life"—that is in absolute, real life, not in day-to-day appearances—and was properly to be found growing at the Centre or navel of the world. And as life eternally renewed is life everlasting, the tree, like all trees, has its stone pillar of witness to this essential indestructibility. Thus there was at Shechem a very famous microcosm of *massebah* and *asherah* which combine to signify eternal cosmic life; in which life by grace and/or striving, the race of men, expressed in their divine hero or king can come to share⁶⁾.

¹⁾ v. PARKE and WORMELL, pp. 9 and 11

²⁾ The passage Gen xlvi 22 containing the devise of Shechem in his favour is an insertion; other than this Joseph is recorded only as passing by Shechem as a boy on his way to Dothan to begin (unsuspectingly) his adventures (Gen xxxvii 12-14).

³⁾ cf. Gen xii 6; xxxv 4. Deut. xi 30; Josh xxiv 26; Jdg ix 6 and 37.

⁴⁾ It is conjectured that by a process of linguistic development, it provides the place name Balatah, the present day village occupying the site, v. SOGGIN, p. 185; G. R. H. WRIGHT "The Place Name Balatah and The Excavation at Shechem", *ZDPV*, 83, 1967, pp. 199ff.

⁵⁾ v. SOGGIN, p. 189. 190 for discussion and full references.

⁶⁾ On this theme v. the interesting work G. WIDENGREN, *The King and the Tree of Life in Ancient Near Eastern Religion*, Uppsala 1951.

t
l
g
"
th
er

(th
loc
as
Ch
enli
cest

1)
2)
3)
SON as
4) I
(v. Jd
Israel
that da
Vetus 1

Evidence of these beliefs, and even of their ritual celebration, is to be read in the Bible where later revelation has taken over the articles of old worship.

The eternal seasonal renewing of natural life, becomes the renewing of the ethical, spiritual, life now revealed by and covenanted between Yahweh and his people. The Deuteronomic writings ¹⁾ and Joshua's fulfilment of them ²⁾ indicate a ceremonial seasonal (new year?) renewing of this covenant which most probably represents the old seasonal "vegetation" rite of renewal ³⁾. Further in that the tree of Shechem marked the natural place for the investiture of a king over Israel ⁴⁾ (comprehending in himself the Corporate "life" of the community), there can be seen memories of a "divine king" ritually associated with the Tree of Life in a cult of more than local significance.

Finally no doubt exists as to the source of the holy water of the Shechem cult. Its "Waters of Life" are referred to as such in specific terms and they are known and can be enjoyed to this day. At the beginning of the Christian Era this water source was associated with the Patriarch Jacob, and has ever since retained the name of Jacob's Well. However although Jacob is the patriarchal inheritor of Shechem traditions, nowhere does the Old Testament refer to him in connection with this salient feature. Presumably at some period in post-Exilic times (under Samaritan influence) it was accepted as a good gift of "our father Jacob" in place of the divine figure who originally "watered" there and bestowed its blessings on mankind. In John iv the evangelist names the well as such (iv 6) and the Samaritan woman emphasises (iv 12) the beneficence of the patriarchal donor.

That the issue of this well was at that time still acknowledged as (the) holy water of Life is presented dramatically in the famous inter-locution by means of a play on the valid understanding of living water as "flowing" opposed to dead (stagnant) water. This passage is for Christianity the central annunciation of that revelation of spiritual enlightenment distinguishing the true doctrine from its natural ancestry. And with considerable dialectical skill the local "props" of

¹⁾ v. Deut. xi 16-32; xxvii 1-26.

²⁾ v. Josh viii 30-36; xxiv 25-28.

³⁾ v. ANDERSON *op. cit.*, pp. 16-19, summarizing the conclusions of W. HARRELLSON as yet unpublished.

⁴⁾ Here the first king over Israel, Abimelech was made by the men of Shechem (v. Jdg ix 6); and doubtless Rehoboam would have been made king over all Israel there had it been in his nature or counsel to bespeak the people for good that day (v. 1 Kings xii).

an old religion are called as witnesses against themselves (or rather against their former witnessing). Neither in this mountain (once claimed as the centre of the living world, nor even in its successor Zion), is true spiritual life to be found; and this famous well of flowing water is not the true water which quenches for ever the deathly thirst and constitutes for mankind the water of everlasting life.

From that day to this the tomb lying beneath the Tree and the deep well of water have been marked by visitors to Shechem, Christian Moslem and Jew alike ¹⁾. They are relics and call to mind the "Sacred Place" (MAQOM) at the centre of the earth which existed before these faiths were invented. And near to the parcel of land which Jacob gave to his son Joseph, the living water and the dying god memorialized near the tree of life still inform the interest of the present century concerning that mythology which preceded the development in the Holy Land of these later faiths.

¹⁾ Julius Africanus in the third century notes that "the local inhabitants still honour the great oak beneath which Jacob buried his idols near 'the Stone'" (v. *Dictionnaire de la Bible* IV₂, Col. 1274); while YAQUT AL-RUMI, the Arab geographer writing at the beginning of the thirteenth century (1000 years later!) refers to Joseph's Tomb "lying under 'the Tree'". (v. YAQUT, ed. WÜSTENFELD, vol. 1 1866 p. 710).

The Tomb is still to be seen cared for under *Waqf* administration although by some strange historical vicissitude the present structure was built or rebuilt by the efforts of the British Consul in Damascus at the middle of last century.