

The Old Arabian Moon Religion And the Mosaic Tradition

(1904)

by

Ditlef Nielsen

Chapters Three and Four:
Sacred Places and Symbols
Moses in Midian

*Translated from the German, abridged, edited,
and annotated.*

Addendum:

The Natsarene and hidden gnosis

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Foreword

This third installment drawn from Nielsen's book is a selection of material from Chapters Three and Four. I have chosen to abridge Nielsen's work for, while he discusses much that is of importance to the historian of religion, a great deal of what he writes is of little direct relevance to Christian origins. The pages selected for translation are noted in the text in brackets. Headings have also been added for clarity.

Chapter Three deals with seminal and enduring symbols in the lunar religion of North Arabia, particularly the sacred mountain, the serpent, and the bull. In Chapter Four Nielsen begins his far-ranging consideration of the oldest stratum of Israelite religion: "Moses in Midian." It will challenge and enlighten the reader, who may learn for the first time that Judaism's roots are thoroughly entwined with the lunar religion of North Arabia. Nielsen explores many unexpected facets of early gnostic religion, facets which have been ignored (perhaps deliberately) for too long.

In the translated chapters, footnotes by the author are signed "DF," mine "RS." A footnote is no place for extended discussion, but can merely indicate in the briefest way a path for further investigation.

The Addendum. The lengthy section which follows Nielsen's text, entitled "The Natsarene and hidden gnosis," complements Nielsen's work and extends it. The terms *Nazarene* and *Nazoraean*, familiar from the Christian gospels, continue to present enigmas. In the Addendum, I show that these terms reflect the Semitic *n-ts-r* (nun-tsade-resh), a root with specifically gnostic connotations going back to the Bronze Age. The dictionary tells us that Hebrew *natsar* means "watch, preserve, guard." Its cognates in related Semitic languages also signify "secret knowledge" and "hidden things." Each of these meanings is a potent concept in the various gnostic religions of all eras, and these significations are known in history at least as far back as the "time of Noah"—that is, before 2,000 BCE when the flood story was first created.

The publication of my 2008 book, *The Myth of Nazareth: The Invented Town of Jesus*, has challenged the all too facile assumption that *Nazarene* in the New Testament means "from Nazareth." As a result, new attention is now being placed on the enigmatic term. For perhaps the first time, we can now see that *Natsarene* (or a close cognate, with Semitic *tsade*) was widely used in early Middle Eastern religions to designate the person of advanced spirituality, a spirituality linked to hidden gnosis. Hence the title of the Addendum, "The Natsarene and hidden gnosis."

A discussion of hidden gnosis inevitably introduces unfamiliar symbols. Common terms like water, the well, the gate, the underworld, and the serpent take on unexpected meanings as metaphors, as do "places" such as *Bethlehem* and *Ephrathah*. Ancient man was much more at home in the spiritual world of gnosticism than is man today, immersed as we are in "the deep sleep of materiality."

— René Salm
(July, 2011)

D. Nielsen's
The Old Arabian Moon Religion and the Mosaic Tradition (1904)

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Character list

’	= “a”	(Heb. alef)
‘	= (stop)	(Heb. ayin)
Ĥ, ĥ	= “ch”	(Heb. het)
Ş, ş	= “ts”	(Heb. tsade)
Ŝ ŝ	= “sh”	(Heb. shin)
ţ	= “th”	(Heb. tav)

Long vowels are marked by a superscript macron.

Chapter Three: Sacred Places and Symbols

Sacred mountain, rock, ziggurat, and temple

[97] The conception that god is especially to be found at certain times produced sacred periods and attached the veneration of the divine to specific times. Divinity was also localized at specific places and in proprietary symbols, where it likewise found sacred expression.

Evidence shows that perhaps the most ancient sacred place for the Semites was the mountain. When one supposes that divinity resides somewhere in the sky, then the conception cannot be far off that to be at the top of a mountain is to approach the divine. Cultic sanctification of the mountain in turn fostered the idea that god lived there or in sanctuaries found there. Indeed, the mountain could itself be identified with god. This is not dissimilar to the association of divinities with various heavenly bodies, where they ‘lived.’

The ‘divine mountain’ is well known in Mesopotamia. The Assyrian *ašur* is “the great mountain,” *šadû rabû*. West Semitic names include *Zûrî-el*, “My Mountain is God” (Num 3:35) and *Zûrî-‘addana* “My Mountain Makes Beloved.”

[98] The most primitive form of this mountain cult is found among the pre-Islamic Arabians who venerated great naturally-occurring rocks—an aspect that survives in Islam itself. According to Wellhausen (who draws on the Arab historian Ibn al-Kalbi) the female divinity *Manât* was venerated in Qudaid in the form of a great boulder, *Al-Lat* as a white four-cornered rock in Taif, and *Dhu-I Halasa* as a white stone in Tabala, south of Mecca. The divinity of Petra, *Dusares*, was a black, four-cornered and unworked stone. *Al-Falz* was a sacred red outcropping on the mountain Aga. In Hadramaut, *Al-Galsad* and *Sa’ad* were similar great prominences.

Shrines and altars were on mountains or great rocks.¹ The blood of the sacrificed animal was poured on it, or in a circle around the sacred stone, *Nusub*. Secondary stones could similarly mark a perimeter enclosing the sacred area, *hîma* or *hâram*, which was off-limits to any profane foot. Accordingly, the ancient Arab sanctuary was no building or temple, as we imagine it to be in later times. Rather, it was bound to a specific place and natural feature, be it a mountain, outcropping, boulder, or perhaps a ring of stones enclosing an open, sacred area.²

Only with the blossoming of the great Semitic states did an elaborately constructed edifice replaced the simple *hâram* of earlier times. [99] Yet it seems that the conception of the mountain as holy place was never lost and lies at the basis of later sacred architecture. The Babylonian three- or seven-storey ziggurat openly manifests the artificially constructed mountain, now systematized according to sacred forms, numbers, and colors—elements which previously had been imagined to endow the natural prominence with holiness. Even as the rock was the center of Arabian worship, so the ziggurat became so in Babylonia.

In the ancient lunar religion, the moon temple of Ur was a formidable structure built already in the third millennium BCE by the kings of the first and second dynasties of Ur.³

¹ Cf. the “high places” (*bemoth*) of Jewish scripture (1 Sam 9:12–25; 10:5, 13 etc.).—RS

² This goes far back into prehistory, as we note in Neolithic stone circles such as Stonehenge.—RS

³ The Sumerian name *E-hursag* means “Temple [house] of the Mountain.”—DN

Today, only a mound of ruins, El-muqajar, remains, and excavations have not yet brought to light the original form of the temple. The moon temple in Harran was a great rotunda situated on a hill outside of the town, one later used defensively as a citadel.

The moon as serpent and bull

[107] The snakelike, twisty course of the moon was known to the Greeks and, as the monuments witness, also to the ancient Semites, for whom the snake was one symbol of the moon god. Like the serpentine movements of Mercury and Venus, the moon also makes its way through the heavens. . . It is a snake with wings—eagle’s wings—for we have seen (p. 62) that the moon is the speediest of all heavenly bodies. The lunar deity was portrayed by the Babylonians as a serpent with a man’s head—a truly fantastic figure. Babylonian cylinder seals portray the moon god of Ur as such a human-headed serpent.

We often encounter the serpent emblem on Assyrian cylinder seals. They are evident in Harran much later, namely, in the Roman imperial period. [108] Chwolsohn (1:401) offers the following description:

The symbols on the Harranian coins that have come down to us from Marcus Aurelius to Gordian are lunar. These lunar symbols are principally the following: the half-moon with a star sometimes in an orb between two snakes, sometimes resting on a sphere. Underneath is a snake, rectangle, column, or altar at whose sides snakes are also to be seen.

The chevrons at the sides are doubtless also symbols of serpents. The South Arabian evidence likewise betrays knowledge of the sacred serpent. [109] Recently, a Turkish expedition uncovered a whitish marble plate, upon which is chiseled an eagle holding a snake. Both are among the oldest sacred symbols of the land. The serpent refers to the path of god through the heavens, the eagle to the speed with which he travels.

Naturally, the planetary deities Mercury and Venus also had wings. In semitic astral theology Venus = Ishtar, symbolized by the dove. Mercury = Haul [*hwl*], associated with the Phoenix bird which, though consumed by fire, never dies but rises from its ashes.

The changing phases and forms of the moon powerfully spurred the religious fantasy of the ancients. The moon is described as “fruit,” *enbu*, as the “fruit which owes its progress to itself.”⁴

From day 6 to day 10 of the lunar cycle (that is, approaching full moon) the kidney-shaped moon is compared to a boat, *elippu*, in the flood story.⁵ Most often, however, the

⁴ Nielsen’s German is: *die Frucht, die von selbst erzeugt wird*, literally, “the fruit which produces itself.” This concept is critical in lunar religion. “Fruit” must refer to the light of the moon, which appears out of nothingness (darkness) at the beginning of the month and eventually dominates the night sky at full moon. Thus, in the first two weeks of each lunar cycle the moon conquers the darkness (ignorance, night) unaided. Its light begins smaller than the proverbial mustard seed (Mt 17:20) and grows inexorably until it masters the sky. In this fashion the moon, as it were, raises itself up. It is the grand self-resurrection, perpetually and repeatedly played out in the heavens before the amazed eyes of man. Of course, the ultimate lesson of lunar (gnostic) religion is that man must do likewise—s/he must self-resurrect from death (ignorance, darkness) to life (understanding, light) through self-reliance and willpower.—RS

⁵ An important theme. Hence, the boat of Atrahasis (Noah) is symbolically the moon. That boat is also called *n-ts-r*, “preserver of life” and is equated with gnosis (see Addendum, below).—RS

lunar orb is the divine tiara (*agû*), and the full moon the “brilliantly shining tiara” (*agû tâsrihîti*). [110] Common also are interpretations of the last and first phases of the moon. These were thought of not as god himself, but only as his foundation at new moon and crown at end moon.

We have seen that the new moon was also thought of as “horns,” *qarnî* (*Enuma Eliš* V.16). One passage describes the new moon as “a strong young bull with powerful horns.” The ancients saw those horns in the great \vee in the constellation Taurus.⁶ South Arabian monuments frequently have simple representations of the new moon side-by-side with bulls’ heads. Most often, however, the new moon consists of an upwardly pointing crescent, with a star—apparently Venus—shining over it.⁷

Sacred representations

[116] The previously-mentioned symbols form a bridge to actual representations of the divine in animal or human form. One must always carefully distinguish the symbols from the divinities represented. [117] For example, the winged bullman is a symbolic being of fantasy that no one ever thought actually existed. One cannot affirm that it directly depicts any god, any more than the representation of the moon on a cylinder seal is the moon itself. The depiction is present only where and when the divinity is symbolized in that particular form.

God reveals himself to the heart of man in the heavens in such a way that by looking up man can see the *invisible* aspect of the divinity,⁸ something man can come to know through careful observation and study. So, the new moon is conceived as a bull, the full moon as a man.⁹

It is curious that no depictions of the bull have yet been found either in stone or metal in South Arabia, though beautiful sculptures in stone and metal indeed exist for many other animals. Furthermore, the bull plays a dominant role in the inscriptions (as symbol for the moon, and as sacrificial animal), and oxen were important to the Arab.

⁶ The pictorial remains show that the angular \vee was often interpreted as the bull’s head, while the curved \smile was the horns of the bull.—RS

⁷ This is the famous crescent and star so familiar from Arab flags and insignia today.—RS

⁸ The conception that god is fundamentally invisible, remote, and transcendent was universal in the ancient world. The Egyptians called that god Nu (Nun), the chief deity among the oldest stratum of gods. In one hieroglyphic passage we read: “I am the god Nu, and those who commit sin shall not destroy me. . . My body is everlastingness. . . I am the creator of the darkness, who makes his seat in the uttermost limit of the heavens, which I love” (Budge 550). The “uttermost limit” can be none other than what we would consider the ‘transcendent.’—RS

⁹ This revealing sentence appears in Nielsen’s text without preface. We have seen that the moon proceeds in the first half of every month from emptiness to fullness, and have interpreted its growing light as the ascendancy of understanding over ignorance (n. 4, above). Now we learn that the new moon was conceived as the bull, and the full moon as (no doubt ‘perfect’) man. Hence, the bull in this case must represent the unrealized potential in man (his ignorant aspect) while “man” is none other than humankind’s potential realized to its fullest extent—even as the full moon dominates the night. The growing fullness of the moon was, for the ancients, a metaphor for the growing self-perfecting of man, i.e. his metamorphosis through wisdom and unaided self-effort (‘unaided,’ because the moon is quintessentially alone in the sky). The bull gives way that the perfected man might arise. In other words, the bull must be metaphorically ‘killed.’ Here we may see the kernel of the later Mithraic religion, with its dominant iconography of the man killing the bull. In this sense, the mystery religion known as Mithraism was at heart a form of gnosticism, in which gnosis (the ‘man’) kills ignorance (the ‘bull’).—RS

Colossal bull figures are known in Babylonian-Assyrian religion, where god was venerated in that form, and the Egyptians venerated Apis in the form of a bull.

So we see that the divine conception led not only to the use of animals in astral religion, but that god was also eventually anthropomorphized. A series of examples could be produced to show how the astral godhead eventually became human, and how the astral symbol took on human form. Depictions of divinities may be of humans with perhaps a few astral elements, such as wings, horns (of the bull god), or a halo. In Babylonia, god very early became man. God is described as a man in early Babylonian literature and art.¹⁰ For example, the moon god of Ur was depicted as an old man with a long beard. [118] Well known are Babylonian monuments, and the fact that Babylonian conceptions early spread far and wide: over Chaldea, Mesopotamia, Syria—and over Palestine, where Phoenician and Philistine evidence betrays strong Babylonian influence, as in the presentation of divinities in the form of people.

Yet, all this was unknown in ancient South Arabia, where god was thought of neither as bull nor as man. The South Arabian cult was apparently without representations, corroborating the view that the representations were only symbols.

Chapter Four: Moses in Midian

The lunar religion of North Arabia

[125] We now direct our attention to North Arabia, in order to examine the biblical story of Moses and the origins of the Jewish religion. In Exodus 2 a man by the name of Moses, of the Hebrew race, flees Egypt because he had killed someone there. He goes to the land of Midian, where he rests by a spring. Midian is in the northwest part of Arabia, astride the Gulf of Aqaba and the Red Sea, south of Edom and east of the Sinai peninsula.

Springs and wells were sacred,¹¹ and in their vicinity could often be found a temple and/or a priest. Thus, it is not surprising that at this spring Moses encountered the daughters of a priest. Moses was invited to the priest's house, eventually married one of the daughters, and stayed there "a long time" (Ex 2:23) as the priest's son-in-law.

[126] Given that the story of Moses, as also that of the Hebrews and their religion, is at a very early juncture closely tied to Midian, it will be of value for our subsequent discussion to review what we know of northwest Arabian religion in ancient times.

The date we are speaking of is about 1400 BCE. What we learned in the previous chapters from cuneiform documents and then extended to Arabian culture and religion,

¹⁰ The equation god = man was, of course, later repudiated in both Jewish and Christian religion.—RS

¹¹ Here is one of the first passages in Jewish scripture where the water source is an important venue for communication with the divine. Theophanies and divine communication often occur by springs and wells (Gen 16:14; 21:19f 24:11f.; 25:11; 29:2f.; 49:22; Ex 2:15; Num 21:16f.; Jud 7:1; 2 Sam 23:15 (=1 Chr 11:17f); Jn 4:6f.). We recall from Paleolithic religion (cf. Salm 2011:Chp. 1) that in the most ancient times the divine was conceived as residing underground, 'below' (rather than 'above' in the sky—a later development). Fresh water nourishes all life and comes from underground. For both these reasons it was considered divine. The corresponding places where water issues out of the earth (springs, wells) were hence sacred, as were also the resulting streams and rivers. Such "living" (flowing) water was particularly associated with the area of Lebanon at an early time (Ps 84:6; SSol 4:15). Mt. Hermon was sacred as far back as the Epic of Gilgamesh. There we find the revered ancient precinct of Dan, from whence issued the headwaters of the holy River Jordan. (See "*Bethlehem, Dan, and the Jordan*" in the Addendum.)—RS

can be generally applied to northwest Arabia and Midian. These regions were heavily influenced by Minaean culture, which was centered in Yemen yet stretched far north along the entire caravan route through Assîr, Hejaz, and Midian, until it reached the Mediterranean Sea and southern Palestine. According to one inscription¹² we know that the Minaeans traded aggressively in northwest Arabia, and also with Egypt. Already in very early times we are justified in speaking of a northern extension of the kingdom or Minaean sub-colony, one which appears frequently in Minaean inscriptions under the name *Muṣr* and whose area roughly corresponds with Midian. Local names in this region betray ancient control from the south—most especially the enduring caravan station of *Ma'ân* near Petra. In Gen 37:28 we read of Midianite traders (probably Minaeans) purchasing Joseph and transporting him into Egypt. No doubt their camels were laden with incense, a Minaean specialty.

Prof. Euting, in a research expedition through North Arabia, uncovered about seventy smallish fragments with writing in Minaean script.¹³ This was in the vicinity of *El-'Ulâ*, between Petra and Medina. These inscriptions date to the end of the second millennium BCE. They give us an idea of religion in the time and place where Moses stayed, according to the Bible.

We have seen that the north of Arabia was politically largely dependent upon its motherland to the south. The South Arabian—specifically Minaean—culture and religion described in the beginning of this book was at home also in the north. Towns, kings, and tribes that are known from South Minaean inscriptions also appear here. Conversely, in the south we find mention of the northern *Ma'ân Muṣrân* (“the Minaeans of *Muṣr*”) and the religion of both regions seems generally the same. Names characteristic in southern Arabia and suffused with personal religious elements are also at home in the north—names like *Yaškur-el*, “God rewards,” *Wahab-el*, “God has given,” *Zayyad-el*, “God has granted,” *'Alai-el*, “God is exalted,” as well as endearing names such as *Sa'd*, “He has endowed,” and *Aslam*, *Salmai* (from *salâm*, “peace”). These reveal a god who is apprehended interiorly, who is just, and who is above all a loving power. [128] He grants fortune and good things to man, and bestows inner peace.

These religious conceptions, elicited from personal names, cohere with the fact that the divine was petitioned under the name *Wadd*, that is, ‘holy, ethical love.’¹⁴ *Wadd* was also addressed in his outer manifestation, *Sahrân*, “the moon.” The cult was saturated with sacred lunar periods and symbols.

We also recognize local variations. Though the gods of the Minaean motherland (*ili'lât ma'an*) are loyally mentioned, neither Venus nor the sun appear as divinities in the northern Euting inscriptions. In the southern kingdom, on the other hand, we encounter a plethora of “Shams” and (especially) ‘Athtar relics, the latter sometimes as father and sometimes as son. The many personal names there with ‘Athtar (‘Atht) attest to this. Such, however, is hardly the case in the north, where not once do we encounter the name ‘Athtar in a personal name, nor a single consecration to that divinity.

¹² Glaser 1155 = Hal. 535.

¹³ Zeitschrift für Assyriologie 12, *Ergänzungsheft* (Weimar 1896): J. H. Mordtmann, “Beiträge zur minäischen Epigraphik.”

¹⁴ *Wadd* was the name of the Minaean moon god, called *Sin* elsewhere (Chp 1 n. 20 & pp. 23 ff.). The definition of god as “holy, ethical love” is today often identified as idiosyncratically Christian. However, we see that such a god predates Christianity by well over a millennium and had its early home in Arabia.—RS

In contrast, many consecrations to *Wadd* have been found in northern Arabia. There, only his name appears on inscriptions. There, only sanctuaries to *Wadd* are mentioned, those of no other divinity. The inhabitants of Northern Arabia are “children of *Wadd*,” and their priests are “priests of *Wadd*.”¹⁵ [129] In short, the inscriptions all witness to the same divinity, evidenced in personal names and in the conception of one god who is a personification of ethical goodness. This divinity loves mankind as his children and rules creation. At the same time, we find a principle of evil, the afore-mentioned “fiend” *Nakruh*, who opposes life and fortune. He appears in inscription no. 36 in opposition to *Wadd*. No. 8 even consecrates a festival to *Nakruh*.

In South Arabia we encounter the trinity of moon, Venus, and sun. It must be accounted astonishing that in North Arabia the ethical astral god is conceived in the simple form of the moon.¹⁶ At the Hamburg Orientalist Congress of 1902, Hommel described the ancient semitic astral religion as a system in which the various planets were not viewed as independent divinities but as parts of one great divinity. Venus was the “hand” of god, Mercury the arm, the sun the eye, Jupiter the head and Mars the mouth. The astral god is one person with a body, of which the planets are its parts. In the north minaeen inscriptions Venus and the sun are never mentioned as independent deities. Does this not mean that the “hand of god,” where it appears, is to be interpreted as Venus, and “the eye of god” as the sun?¹⁷

According to the records, this religion had an all-encompassing and very complex cult. It certainly cannot be identified with the simple cult of the later Arabs. [130] The fall

¹⁵ When we recall that *Wadd* is both the god of love and of the moon, it becomes clear that both northern and southern Arabia proffered their allegiance to the lunar religion.—RS

¹⁶ Thus, the lunar religion in its purest and most emphatic form was found in Northern Arabia, the land which received Moses and the Israelites before their entry into the Promised Land.—RS

¹⁷ An intriguing possibility is the connection between Moses and the Kenites. In Judg 4:11 the Kenites are the descendants of Hobab, who in some passages is designated the father-in-law of Moses. The Kenites were nomads, craftsmen associated with metalworking, and scribes (I Chr 2:55) who ultimately traced their ancestry to the house of Rechab. Some scholars maintain that Moses was introduced to *Yahweh* and his worship through Kenite mediation. It is clear that the Kenites are to be associated with the Mosaic covenant (IDB III.6). King David was related to the Kenites in some way (I Sam 30:29). A branch of the Kenites was known to inhabit the Galilee (Judg 4:11; 5:24). Some of these associations will prove important to the development of Mosaic—and even of Christian—origins.

Moses domiciled with Jethro, a priest of Midian (Ex 3:1; 4:18; 18:1f.), and married one of his daughters. From Nielsen’s discussion above, there can be little doubt that the Midianite priest Jethro must have been a Levite and also a devotee of the moon god *Wadd*. Jethro affirmed to Moses that “*Yahweh* [‘That Which Is’] is greater than all gods” (Ex 18:11). This complex of circumstances strongly suggests that the roots of Israelite religion in Midian and via Jethro were levitical (see next note), lunar, and gnostic.

Careful study shows that most religions, indeed, possess gnostic roots. Typically, those roots are betrayed when the religion institutionalizes. The all-consuming *individual* task of gnosticism (i.e., seeking and finding ‘That Which Is’ [*Yahweh*, ‘truth’]) is replaced with the all-consuming *corporate* task of a religion whose main goals are to gain adherents and maintain status. Gnosticism is too difficult for the masses, and hence there is an inherent tension between gnosticism and the institution which seeks widespread appeal. For every institution, the betrayal of gnosticism cannot be far off. That betrayal predictably occurs when the religion becomes organized and popular, that is, ‘institutionalized.’ In Israelite religion, that great substitution/betrayal occurred with the denigration of Levites at the hands of relative newcomers, the “descendants of Aaron,” and simultaneously with the post-exilic activity of the so-called “Priestly” writer.

The result is that widespread and powerful religions are predictably anti-gnostic. This obtains to such a degree that gnosticism is the designated archenemy of most organized religions (Buddhism being a notable exception).—RS

of the South Arabian kingdoms witnessed the passing of great palaces, magnificent mansions, and heavenward-reaching edifices, all made out of marble or granite. These imposing edifices were replaced by poor huts, tents, and mud-brick structures. A similar change occurred in Arabian shrines.

The north minaeen inscriptions—almost entirely consecrations—are difficult to decipher precisely because so many terms occur which refer to cultic elements long forgotten and to lost building techniques. They show that the North Arabian religion of long ago was conducted with great pomp and ornate display. Among cult sites we read of “the house of Wadd in Dedan” which, unfortunately, is not described. *Raitum* appears to be another cult site—if not another name for god. Significantly, the priests who managed this cult were called *lewi*’, a specifically a north minaeen designation.¹⁸ In the south minaeen region the cultic priests were called *rašwu*.

Midianite names in the Bible

It is into this religious environment that we must place Moses the Hebrew. The religious elements described above were extant at his time and in his destination of refuge. This obtains whether or not the priest with whom Moses stayed can precisely be identified as a Minaean. We must now ask to what extent the data gained from the archaeological and epigraphic evidence accord with the biblical stories which take place in Midian. Only in this way can we evaluate the trustworthiness of the biblical record.

The priest with whom Moses domiciled is once called *Re’û-el* (Ex 2:18) and once *Jethrô* (Ex 3:1). A vacillating tradition may have caused this difference in names. However, it likely owes to a peculiar custom among the ancient Minaeans. [131] Unlike the south arábians who had a single name, the Minaean kings and priests of Wadd had two names in recognition of their higher status. One Minaean king was called *Waqah-el Jathi’a*, another *Jatha’el Rijâm*. The name *Re’û-el Jethrô* would not be remarkable if the bearer were a priest or king, for in such cases double designations were characteristic.

In fact, the name *Re’û-el Jethrô* accords well with names found in the monuments both as to linguistic form and religious implications. *Re’û-el* contains the common Minaean element *el*, and means “Friend is God.” In Ma’in, we recall, God was petitioned by the name *Wadd*, “Friend.” *Jethrô*, like *Sa’d*, *Hana’*, etc., is a term of endearment which also appears in the inscriptions, though its meaning is not entirely clear.

Jethro’s daughter has the name *Šippora*, also a term of endearment, but with the feminine ending (cf. *Salmai* and *’Adat*, priestesses likewise mentioned in the inscriptions). The two children of Moses are *Eli-’ezer* “My God Helps” and *Ger-sum* “His Name Abides With Us” or “His Name Is Our Guest.” These belong to the fund of old

¹⁸ Regarding the early development of Israelite religion, the importance of the term “levites,” *lewi*’, as designation for the priests of ancient North Arabia cannot be exaggerated. (Incidentally, “Levi” also appears as an ancestor of Jesus Christ at Lk 3:24, 29). The book of Genesis describes Levi as the third son of Jacob (29:34)—a pseudo-explanation rationalizing the existence of Levites/priests who had actually been known from time immemorial. Nielsen here explains that the Levites were, in fact, originally ancient priests of the north minaeen lunar divinity Wadd. That divinity was, as Nielsen has also shown, the god of “holy, ethical love.” This is, of course, the predominant character of the God known later in Christianity.

Moses, it would appear, was a gnostic follower of the moon god Wadd. He was a Levite. It can be no coincidence that Moses received his commandments from Yahweh at the top of Mt. Sinai, the mountain of the ‘Moon-god’ (alternately called *Sin*). We shall soon see that Mt. Sinai was, in fact, located not in the “Sinai” peninsula but in Northern Arabia.—RS

Arabian names. Finally, the priest's son, who later becomes Moses' brother-in-law, is *Hobab*, from *Hobab-el*, "God is the Loving One." [132] This name is specifically Arabian.

Epithets were commonly used in ancient Arabia to refer to cultic sites where a divinity was venerated. One famous rocky outcropping in Hadramaut was known as *Al Galsad*. A part of Mt. Aga had the name *Al Fals*, and the white stone in Tabâla was known as *Dhu-l Halaşa*. It is in this manner that we should understand the name *Hôreb*. [133] The Midianite god who "lives" there, or who is simply represented by that mountain, is called *Hôreb*—"The Dry One," equivalent to the Sabaeen *Haubas* (Hommel). He is the divinity who, by the power of the moon, pulls back the waters and makes the seabed dry.¹⁹

Hence, the name *Hôreb* designates the moon god. This suggests that the cultic site in question was not far from the seashore, where the ebb and flood of the tide have especially strong manifestations. Indeed, no such divine appellation has been attested in central Arabia. We are, however, considering northwest Arabia, the coastal zone bordering the Gulf of Aqaba and the Red Sea, where the designation of such a divine name would be understandable.

[136] [The giving of the commandments] apparently coincided with the great festivities at the beginning of the year, which were celebrated at sacred sites. God revealed his name: Yahweh. This name does not conflict with the fact that we know the god of the precinct as *Hôreb*, "The Dry One," for a divinity could go by multiple names. For example, Wadd was also venerated in the area under the name *Şahrân*, "the moon." Like *Şahrân*, the name *Hôreb* is astral. On the other hand, *Yahweh* is, like *Wadd*, an ethical name²⁰—one that is purely Arab and had already been familiar among

¹⁹ The specific divine capacity to "pull back the water" was long ago of especial significance. It continued to be venerated through antiquity. We see that capacity in the parting of the Sea of Reeds (Moses), and in the various partings of the Jordan River (Joshua and others). In certain apocryphal works (the Book of Gad the Seer, Samaritan and Mandaean documents) the prophet stands on dry land in the middle of the river. Thus, his justification before the ancient divinity *Hôreb/Haubas* (who controls this law of nature) is triumphantly displayed. On the other hand, *Hôreb*'s enemies were revealed by their subjugation to the deadly water which, in the case of the pursuing Egyptians, came crashing down upon them (Ex 14:28).

Such elements were familiar to the Jewish scribes who penned the Torah. At the Israelite crossing of the Jordan River under Joshua, the priests of Yahweh stand in the middle of the river—on dry ground—thus demonstrating the substitution of Yahweh for the ancient *Hôreb*. In fact, the Israelite priests needed only to touch the water for it pull back (Jos 3:16. Cf. below p. 23).

Perhaps the most remarkable manifestation of *Hôreb*'s power was not the Israelite exodus from Egypt at all, but the much older flood story. The entire world was flooded by water in cosmic judgment. No greater demonstration of *Hôreb*'s power would be possible.

The equivalence *Hôreb = Haubas* opens a further line of inquiry. *Haubas* is generally equated with the moon god in ancient southern Arabia (Saba). Despite the uncertain etymology of the name, the Semitic root *hbs* has been proposed (Haussig 509), meaning "come suddenly, surprise." This, of course, has relevance to the suddenness of the waters overtaking the Egyptian army at the Exodus, and also those overwhelming mankind during the Flood. (For discussion of 'suddenness,' 'watchfulness,' and *n-ts-r* see p. 15 below.)

Suddenness as a characteristic of God has echoes both in Jewish scripture and in the New Testament. Thus, the "suddenness" of god is an important aspect of divine power from Bronze Age religion through Christianity.

In sum, the god *Hôreb/Haubas* is a divinity of judgment: he holds back the waters that the just may pass, and he "suddenly" releases the waters that the wicked will perish. In the New Testament, this has been theologically transmuted into an eschatological judgment. This concept, however, surely has its source in the ancient moon religion of North Arabia.—RS

²⁰ Nielsen Chp. 1, p. 8.

the old semitic names. Just as the Minaean national god was known under the name Wadd, “Love,”²¹ so he becomes the folk god of the Hebrews under the name *Yahweh*, “He Exists.”

Jethro the priest-king

[137] Because Moses hesitated in the fulfillment of his heavy commission, he received the serpent-staff as proof of his divinely-endowed power, that the Hebrews might follow him as one sent by god (Ex 4:1–4). In that era, the priest’s staff played a role similar to the king’s scepter in more modern times. These were symbols of rulership and dignity. A divinity was often depicted as a human with a staff. Because the staff marks one as god’s representative, we can readily understand its serpentine form—the snake was the sacred symbol of the divine.²²

The sacred staff marks Moses’ entry into the Arabian office of priest, and as future priest of the Hebrews who would chose to follow him. It is not without interest to determine more closely of what that priestly office consisted.

At that time there were two forms of priesthood. In northwestern Arabia the *Lewi’*²³ was the priest who functioned in and around the sanctuary. He performed the sacrifice and the sacred rites. Then there the *Kāhin*, a pre-eminent social and political person, the head of the clan from whom the kingship later developed.²⁴ The Assyrian *Patesi*, the Sabaean *Mukarrib*, and perhaps the Minaean *Kabire* were comparable priests-governors-kings. The state was at that time a theocracy whose head represented the divine as king and priest.

Among the pre-Islamic Arabs both offices of *Lewi’* and *Kāhin* are known. Later Muslim literature adopted a north Arabian name for the priest-king, that is, *Kāhin*. The Arab *Kāhin* was governor, head of the clan, and judge. In the latter capacity he settled disputes, but also acted as prophet and “seer”—that is, he could foretell the future owing to his unique relationship with the gods. He interpreted oracles, spoke in the name of the divine, and lived at or near the sanctuary.

[138] Jethro/Re’u-el was such a priest, for he is explicitly called *Kohen*. The Hebrew word *Kohen* is formally identical to the Arabian *Kāhin*. Wellhausen has noted that the Arabian word cannot be explained as a borrowing from the Hebrew. On the contrary, the Hebrew *Kohen* has a genuinely Arabian origin.

In his future position as religious leader, Moses was a *Kāhin*. Upon assuming that office on holy ground he was granted three miracles, which he later fulfilled with the staff (Ex 4:17). His heirs in Canaan (Joshua and the subsequent “judges”), however, were called *Ŝofet* (“judge”), conforming to the Canaanite and Phoenician models of priest-king, while the word *Kohen* in Canaan became the customary designation for a priest among the Hebrews.

²¹ Nielsen Chp. 1 p. 39. On the Midian provenance of Yahweh, see also N. Lemche, *Prelude to Israel’s Past* (Hendrickson 1998) p. 60.

²² Nielsen pp. 107–08 (above).

²³ Whence *Levite*.—RS

²⁴ The first kings were primarily religious figures, that is, persons whose pre-eminence owed to the favor of the gods.—RS

Aaron the cult-priest

Moses hesitated and did not wish to go up the mountain alone. Hence, the cult-priest Aaron was provided him as companion. In this passage we meet the terms *lewi* (cult-priest) and *Aharōn* (Aaron) for the first time in Jewish scripture. Hommel and Mordtmann have shown that the biblical *lewi* corresponds to the term *levi'* often found in north minaeen inscriptions. It designated the priest officiating at the sacrifice. Aaron was one of the north Arabian priests whose duty—in contrast to the priest-king—consisted in the performance of religious rites and associated ceremonies which, according to Jewish scripture, were tied to the midianite cult. He would not have been the only cultic priest. The inscriptions attest that many priests *lewi'* as well as priestesses *levi'at* officiated in the cult during that era.

The office of *lewi'* was inherited, and the north minaeen priests formed a clergy or clan. [139] Similarly, among the later Hebrews we read of the *benē Aharōn*, “children of Aaron,” and of the *bēt Aharōn*, “house of Aaron.” They made up the hereditary priestly clan of Levites. This contrasted with the authority of the Judge or priest-king, which was not inherited.

The name *Aharōn* is, on account of its *-ōn* ending, specifically minaeen. It corresponds to the termination *-ān*. Compare the south arabian *Salhān* ‘*Alahān* and the north minaeen ‘*Aharān*. In the latter name Hommel sees a direct parallel to the biblical *Aharōn*. If this is the case, then the name Aaron is represented among the north minaeen inscriptions found by Euting.

In any case, the biblical Aaron is not Hebrew. He first enters the story in Midian, is first noted in conjunction with an arabian sacred place, and is called *ha-lewi'*, “the priest”—a term used during that era only in north arabia for cult-priests. [140] Jethro was associated with the sacred place as *Kāhin*, an office endowed with a great deal of gravity according to the later north arabian inscriptions. Aaron was one of the *Levi'* of whom the inscriptions also relate, a person whom, according to Jewish scripture, Moses met for the first time at the sacred sanctuary in Midian (Ex 4:27).

[142] When “God spoke to Moses,” according to the biblical accounts, an inner voice is not necessarily intended. Two verses of Jewish scripture offer the key to the proper interpretation of this phrase. In one we read: “He [Aaron] indeed shall speak for you to the people; he shall serve as a mouth for you, and you shall serve as God for him” (Ex 4:16). So, the divinity does not merely use the priest as mouthpiece, but the king-priest (later High Priest) is expressly identified with the divinity and functions in his stead. What he says, God says.

The Mosaic covenant is not given by the priest Moses—later midrash also forbids this interpretation. Moses is God, as also stated in a second verse: “See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet” (Ex 7:1).

Addendum
by René Salm

The Natsarene and hidden gnosis

In Mesopotamian cuneiform texts of the second millennium BCE—the oldest stratum of Semitic usage—*našāru* has a wide complex of meanings. They include: (1) be watchful, alert, on guard; (2) restrain, control; (3) keep secrets; and (4) preserve, keep, observe.²⁵ The root is *n-ts-r*, in Hebrew nun-tsade-resh (נצר). From this root we must also seek the derivation of the Greek ναζαρηνοϛ, found in the New Testament (Gospel of Mark), and also of its cognates ναζωραιοϛ (Gospel of Matthew), the intermediate form ναζαρα (“Q”), and finally the name of the village from which Jesus ostensibly hailed, ναζαρεθ. For a number of reasons, it has generally been acknowledged that the latter does not derive from the Semitic name of the village, נצרת (“Natsareth”).²⁶

From the Semitic root *n-ts-r* also derives the Mandaean *Našuraia* (pl. *-aiia*):

[T]hose amongst the community who possess secret knowledge are called *Našuraiia*—Nazoreaeans... At the same time the ignorant, or semi-ignorant laity are called ‘Mandaeans,’ *Mandaiia*—‘gnostics.’

(E. Drower p. IX.)

Miss Drower writes elsewhere that the *Našuraiia* are those “skilled in esoteric knowledge.”²⁷ On account of that esoteric knowledge Mandeism is known as a gnostic religion.

Being “watchful,” “on guard,” and spiritually “awake” are recurring themes in Near Eastern religion going back at least to Sumerian times. The Mesopotamian and Hebrew usages of *natsar* are comparable, with the exception that the esoteric or hidden dimension known in the former is muted in Jewish scripture.²⁸ This is not surprising, for secret knowledge—especially that leading to ‘gnosis’ (man’s apperception of the transcendent or of the divine)—has never been acceptable to normative Judaism.

Natsar is frequently encountered in Jewish scripture—often accompanied by its synonym *shamar*, “watch” (from whence the *Samaritans*, also “watchers”). Watchfulness, of course, protects against the element of surprise, and Yahweh’s actions come ‘suddenly’ to those who are not prepared. His actions are punishments, judgments upon the wicked. Yahweh appears unexpectedly (Mal 3:1); he suddenly

²⁵ CAD vol. 11, p. 33 ff. (*našāru*).

²⁶ The traditional derivation is problematic on several counts. Linguistically, the Semitic tsade (voiceless) does not complement the Greek zeta (voiced). Hebrew tsade generally (though not always) yields Greek sigma. Literary problems also attend a derivation of *Nazarene/Nazorean* from *Natsareth/Nazareth*, e.g., Acts 24:5, where Paul is called “a ringleader of the sect of Nazoreans”—hardly understandable if “Nazorean” derives from a mere village. Finally, there is the weighty archaeological problem, namely, that Nazareth did not exist in the putative time of “Jesus,” that is, at the turn of the era (Salm, *The Myth of Nazareth*, 2008).

²⁷ Drower and Macuch, 285.

²⁸ *Natsar* has the connotation of secrecy in only a few OT passages (Is 48:6; 65:4; Pr 7:10). Cf. BDB 666.

metes out retribution to his enemies (Isa 48:3; Pr 24:22); and similar *quick* retribution awaits those who oppose the will of the Israelites, Yahweh's servants (Jer 18:22; 49:19; 50:44; 51:8). Most frequently, however, unexpected and sudden disaster awaits those who are guilty of moral turpitude (Isa 47:11; Job 22:10; Jer 4:20, 6:26, 15:8; Pr 3:25; 6:15; 29:1; Hab 2:7).²⁹ In these passages, the focus is not on the destructive action itself so much as on the perception of that action—the divine judgment occurs *when least expected*. This experiential aspect of “surprise” is carefully delineated in Jewish scripture:

Disaster shall fall upon you, which you will not be able to ward off;
And ruin shall come on you suddenly, of which you *know* nothing.
(Isa 47:11, emphasis added.)

The key here is knowledge into the ways of the divine. The wise person knows, and thus the action of the divine does not catch him off guard. He avoids ruin because he is watchful, and his watchfulness lends him insight unseen by his peers—*gnosis*.

Noah, the first Natsarene

In the flood story, secret knowledge protects the wise person against that which destroys the entire world. The flood was a divine judgment upon all mankind, one which came suddenly. But god gave Noah secret knowledge in advance: to build an ark. The ark itself represents and symbolizes the secret saving knowledge of god. After all, it was the ark that saved Noah. Thus it is no surprise that in the Akkadian flood story the boat is named *Natsirat Napishtim*, “Preserver of Life,” a phrase employing the root *n-ts-r*.³⁰

It should also not surprise us that *netsēru* in Akkadian means “secret knowledge,” particularly that received from the moon god Ea/Enki.³¹

The ark came to rest on the very top of Mt. Nitsir—also from the root *n-ts-r*. Given the etymology of the name, Mt. Nitsir represents the saving knowledge of god, the “secret knowledge” not vouchsafed to the rest of the world. Metaphorically speaking, it is a firm resting place—indeed, the only resting place in existence while the rest of the world is under water. The top of Mt. Nitsir is halfway between earth and heaven, where god and man meet. In the simplest terms, Noah has miraculously pierced through the barrier (the flood) ordinarily separating life and death.³² He appears unscathed ‘on the

²⁹ In Jewish scripture, suddenness can also be an amoral aspect of nature (Job 5:3; Ec 9:12). Some passages speak of the speed of divine retribution, whether against the enemies of the Israelites, against the morally corrupt person, or against the one who opposes Yahweh. The Semitic root characterizing Yahweh's speedy retribution is most often *maher* (מהר)—“quickly.” Cf. Deut 4:26; 7:3–4; 9:3, 12, 16. In one passage Moses warns: “Yahweh will send upon you disaster, panic, and frustration in everything you attempt to do, until you are destroyed and perish *quickly*, on account of the evil of your deeds, because you have forsaken me” (Deut 28:20).

³⁰ Lambert and Millard 126 line 8.

³¹ CAD vol. 11.2: 276, Bezold 204. Also cf. D. Nielsen chp. 2 (translated by myself), the section “N-ts-r and the lunar origins of the flood story,” esp. nn. 31 & 32.

³² ‘Crossing over’ is a universal religious metaphor for attaining enlightenment, e.g. in Buddhism where it is used frequently. In Paleolithic religion, one crossed the boundary between the mundane and the divine by mystically going through the subterranean cave wall. See Salm 34–39.

other side'³³ (i.e., 'after' the flood). Secret knowledge allows the Natsarene to be 'awake' when others are 'sleeping,' to act when others do not, and in these ways to overcome death—that is, to attain immortality. In essence, Noah was the first Natsarene.

In the Akkadian version of the flood story the hero is Atrahasis, "Ultra-Wise." His very name betrays the possession of secret knowledge, *gnosis*. Because of his ability to survive the flood, Atrahasis was granted immortality. The Akkadian version is fundamentally a positive, empowering story, in sharp contrast to the biblical Garden of Eden narrative. In the latter, Adam seeks wisdom and to live forever. However, he is unsuccessful and, furthermore, is punished for the attempt—banished from the garden of Eden (Gen 3:22–24), condemned to labor for his bread and to return to the dust of the earth. The optimism of the older religion is here in stark contrast with the fundamental pessimism of Judaism.

The flood story should be interpreted in a gnostic context. Atrahasis/Noah has secret wisdom (*gnosis*) which saves. The rest of mankind lacks that wisdom and dies in sudden disaster.

Gnosis and flowing, 'living' water

Wisdom, particularly secret wisdom, was probably the first religion of man—it was the special dispensation of the Paleolithic shaman who descended deep into the dark underworld (caves) and there passed beyond the psychic vortex to "the other side," and where he met the loving "being of light."³⁴ The shaman would return to the world above with special wisdom, 'gnosis,' about the relations between man, animals, the divine, and nature.

Wisdom continued to be located in the realm below during the Neolithic Era. But during those six millennia (c. 9,500–3,500 BCE) the life-giving properties of water became prominent with the development of agriculture. The apt equation wisdom = water was made, for wisdom is spiritually life-giving, and water is physically life-giving. This was reinforced by the fact that fresh water, flowing water, appeared to come out of the deep earth through springs and wells.

If wisdom = water, one might consider it curious that, in the flood story, 'wisdom' metaphorically kills mankind. After all, is not wisdom (particularly in a gnostic context) precisely that which saves mankind? The mystery evaporates, however, when we realize that wisdom is a two-edged sword: those who possess it are saved, while those who do not are lost. This insight was known to the ancients and lies at the foundation of the flood story. Mankind perished in the flood because it lacked secret wisdom. The water—that is, 'truth'—saved Atrahasis/Noah but killed the rest of mankind.

In Mesopotamian religion of the Bronze Age, the lord of wisdom, Enki, made his home in the underground ocean (*abzu*). Places where water emerged from the *abzu*—wells and springs—were sacred. Those 'places of gnosis' and 'sources of gnosis' were guarded by divine servants of Enki known as Laḫmu (m.) and Laḫamu (f.). In Bronze Age iconography a Laḫmu stands at each side of a gate, indicating that gnosis is an entryway to the divine. In this sense, wells and springs were gates to the gnostic underworld.

En-ki in Sumerian means "Lord of the Earth." But his Akkadian name is E-a ("House of Water"). The latter name perfectly corresponds with the most prestigious Iron Age

³³ See below for a discussion of this important phrase.

³⁴ Salm:22 ff.

temples. In them could be found a large tank of water, called the *abzu*—such as the “brazen sea” in Solomon’s temple (2 Chron 4:2), and the imposing pool of water in the Aššur temple of Sennacherib (r. 704–681 BCE).

J. Roberts has linguistically linked the name *Ea* to the Semitic *hyy* (“to live”), and in this way to the Hebrew god *Yahweh*.³⁵ Roberts further shows that the term is related to the adjective *hayy(um)*, “alive, living,” with the specific meaning of spring-fed or running water.³⁶ The latter is of considerable importance in the early history of gnosticism, for it linguistically confirms the link between hidden wisdom (represented by *Ea/Enki*) and running, flowing, “living” water. That link—which is, *nota bene*, ancient and ‘gnostic’—manifests in late antiquity as the rite of baptism.

Baptism, water, and Bethlehem

Enki lived in the watery *abzu*, the place of gnosis located in the underworld. He was the divine mediator, friendly advisor, and advocate of mankind, known for intellectual cunning and the ability to find solutions to the most difficult problems confronting man. It was *Enki*, for example, who advised *Ziusudra*³⁷ to build the ark and thus escape the flood. As lord of gnosis, *Enki*'s stature is unrivaled in the earliest records.

In both Sumerian and Akkadian religion, the *Laḥmus* were divine helpers of *Enki*. As mentioned above, a pair of *Laḥmus* is often portrayed in Babylonian iconography standing at both sides of a sacred gate, for they guarded and granted access to gnosis. Through that gate gnosis came to man, and through it man also had to metaphorically pass, in a reverse direction, if he wished to reach immortality and transcend his ignorance. Thus man symbolically enters water and becomes baptized—a gnostic metaphor for enlightenment in pre-Christian times. The gate or ‘home’ at which that spiritual transition took place was known as *Beit-Laḥmu*, the “house of *Laḥmu*,” that is, Bethlehem (House “of *Laḥmu*,” not “of Bread,” *lehem*)³⁸—the birthplace of Jesus the Nazarene.

The Israeli archaeologist Aviram Oshri has shown that the settlement of Bethlehem in Judea (9 km south of Jerusalem) did not exist at the turn of the era when Jesus was allegedly born.³⁹ In fact, no archaeological evidence of human settlement there exists before late Roman times. There are indeed Chalcolithic and Bronze Age remains below the steep Bethlehem ridge nearby, in a location called *Beit Sahur*, but “when the settlement [of Bethlehem] was first established is not known” (K. Prag). Furthermore,

³⁵ Roberts:19–21 and p. 80, n. 117. Discussion is at Kramer:244. Other parallels between *Enki* and *Yahweh* have been noted, e.g., the confusion of languages in the tower of Babel story (cf. Gen. 11:9). “It is *Enki* who, for reasons that are not made entirely clear, sets up ‘contention’ in the speech of humankind and brings the Golden Age to an end” (Kramer:88).

³⁶ Confirmation of this is found in the later identification of *Ea* with *nagbu*, “source, spring, groundwater.” See Kramer:145.

³⁷ *Ziuzudra* is the Sumerian name of the flood hero. *Atrahasis* and *Utnapishtim* are Akkadian names, and *Noah* the Hebrew name.

³⁸ “The former explanation that ‘Bethlehem’ means ‘house of bread’ is pure folk-etymology. The name means ‘house of (the goddess) Lahama [sic].” (C. Kopp, *The Holy Places of the Gospels*, Herder, 1963:3.) Some traditionalist scholars continue to reject the *Lahmu/Lahamu* derivation (e.g., B. Chilton, *Rabbi Jesus*, Doubleday, p. 8).

³⁹ A. Oshri, “Where Was Jesus Born?” *Archaeology*, Nov-Dec. 2005:42–45.

the Old Testament town is entirely unsubstantiated by the material finds. 2 Samuel mentions a gate and a well (see next paragraph). These have not been found. 2 Chronicles 11:5–12 notes that Rehoboam made the “fortress” of Bethlehem “very strong,” but neither wall nor structures dating to biblical times have come to light.⁴⁰ In other words, the settlement is—like Nazareth—amply attested in the literary record (in this case, Jewish scripture) but not in the material record.

It seems that “Bethlehem” was a purely mythical place. Indeed, we have seen that it was already the mythical gate to gnosis and the home of the Laḥmu god. An echo of this view can even be found in Jewish scripture. 2 Samuel depicts Bethlehem as the place of a sacred well from which David wished to draw special water. Our explanation above supplies the key to this rather bizarre Old Testament story:

Towards the beginning of harvest three of the thirty chiefs went down to join David at the cave of Adullam, while a band of Philistines was encamped in the valley of Rephaim. David was then in the stronghold; and the garrison of the Philistines was at Bethlehem. David said longingly, “O that someone would give me water to drink from the well of Bethlehem that is by the gate!” Then the three warriors broke through the camp of the Philistines, drew water from the well of Bethlehem that was by the gate, and brought it to David. But he would not drink of it; he poured it out to Yahweh, for he said, “Yahweh forbid that I should do this. Can I drink the blood of the men who went at the risk of their lives?” Therefore he would not drink it. The three warriors did these things. (2 Sam 23:13–17)

David at first yearns for the water of the Bethlehem well—a gnostic yearning. But later he pours that water out on the ground “to Yahweh.” This represents a conversion—illogical in the contrived Jewish setting (for David was already devoted to Yahweh)—but significant to the Hebrew priests and scribes who wished to make the all-important point that Yahweh is superior to the search for gnosis. They concocted an imperfect story which does precisely that. It is one of innumerable passages in Jewish scripture teaching that obedience to Yahweh supersedes man’s inherent gnostic aspirations. That is, in fact, a basic teaching of Judaism.

David, Bethlehem, and the scribes

To this day, archaeologists cannot be certain where the settlement of Bethlehem was located. The scribes who penned the Jewish scriptures were also in doubt, for in several cases they found it necessary to identify Bethlehem with another unlocated settlement called Ephrath/Ephrathah: “So Rachel died, and she was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem), and Jacob set up a pillar at her grave; it is the pillar of Rachel’s tomb, which is there to this day” (Gen 35:19–20; cf. 48:7). However, Jewish scripture clearly locates Rachel’s tomb to the north of Jerusalem (1 Sam 10:2; Jer 31:15). This anomaly has long caused both Jewish and Christian scholars a good deal of consternation.

⁴⁰A summary of the material evidence is in K. Prag, “Bethlehem: A Site Assessment,” *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 132 (2000):169ff.

The Jewish scribes who penned the Torah call the person from Ephrath an “Ephratite.” To add to the confusion, however, they at times equate Ephrathite with Ephraimite—that is, with one from the hill country north of Jerusalem.⁴¹

Thus, Bethlehem is sometimes located in Ephraim, north of Jerusalem, and sometimes in Judea, south of the great city. A likely explanation for this contradictory situation is that the southern location of Bethlehem began with Judaism’s need that its great champion and elect of Yahweh, David, come from the region about Jerusalem, namely, from Judean soil.

The Jewish scribes also desired that David come from ‘Beit-Laḥmu,’ for in the preceding ages the gate to Enki’s underworld was whence came gnosis and immortality. After all, when the Jewish scriptures were written, the Yahweh cult with its center in Jerusalem was new and still quite small. No doubt the older pagan religions, including the gnostic water-cults of Mesopotamia and the Levant, were widespread among the people. The scribes appropriated major elements of older religion, including firstly the name of their god *Yahweh* which, as we have seen (p. 17), is linguistically linked to the name *Ea* (Enki), lord of gnosis. D. Nielsen has also shown that *Yahweh* was borrowed by the Israelites from the lunar religion of North Arabia, during the early stage in which they were still gnostic and in Midian.⁴² Secondly, we now have evidence that the Jerusalem scribes⁴³ appropriated the mythological Beit-Laḥmu and transformed it into “Bethlehem of Judea.” The place was imaginary during their time,⁴⁴ but this did not exercise them, for so much in their accounts regarding David was also imaginary—including perhaps David himself.

The Jerusalem scribes localized David, Bethlehem, Ephrathah, Yahweh, and whatever else they desired to Judea. Note, for example, how the following well-known verse emphasizes the town’s Judean location:

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, *who are one of the little clans of Judah*,
from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.
(Micah 5:2, emphasis added.)

Indeed, the origin was “old, from ancient days,” for the mythical Beit-Laḥmu had long been revered as gateway to gnosis and immortality. Having made “Bethlehem of Judah” the home of David, the scribes proceeded to give the ‘place’ a history. They did so with an engaging story of David’s ancestry—the book of Ruth. There we read of the village’s leading man, Boaz; of how the whole town was excited when Ruth and Naomi arrived (1:19); and of how Ruth, a model of propriety and decency—now the wife of Boaz—became the ancestor of the future King David (4:13, 17). It is a beautiful story, one so edifying that no one might suspect that the town did not even exist when it was penned.

⁴¹ Judg 12:5; 1 Sam 1:1; 1 Kg 11:26.

⁴² Nielsen, chp. 4:129, 136.

⁴³ These scribes are known as the Aaronides and are associated with the “Priestly” source in the documentary hypothesis (see below).

⁴⁴ Bethlehem of Judea was settled much later (see next section). The only Iron Age Bethlehem to pass the test of archaeology is Bethlehem in Zebulun (Jos 19:15).

Thus the Jerusalem scribes transformed the gate of gnosis into the place of origin of Judaism's greatest king. Their aim was for greater things to happen in Bethlehem, all at the service of Yahweh. Indeed, an important scene in the book of Ruth occurs at the very gate in Bethlehem, which we have seen was of such significance in the older religion:

Then all the people who were at the gate, along with the elders, said, "We are witnesses. May Yahweh make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you produce children in Ephrathah and bestow a name in Bethlehem..."
(Ruth 4:11)

The name which Judaism "bestowed" in Bethlehem was that of King David. Yet, we may ask: If the birthplace of that celebrated king is entirely mythical, then could its favorite son have existed at all?

The cave of Bethlehem

We have seen that the Jerusalem scribes required a Judean home for King David, but one may wonder how his hometown came to be finally localized nine kilometers south of Jerusalem, at the place we now know as Bethlehem. Did something recommend this spot?

In fact, it was not the Jerusalem scribes who localized Bethlehem, but Christians of much later times. Amazingly, the birthplace of Jesus was not determined until the time of Constantine in the early fourth century CE. About 315 CE the Christian monarch authorized construction of a basilica over the very spot Jesus was allegedly born—a cave.⁴⁵

This cave was not in a settlement but in a forest, as we know from reports of the church fathers.⁴⁶ It was no ordinary cave, however. For a long time it had been a center of the cult of Adonis. Jerome relates (about 395 CE) that the Roman emperor Hadrian constructed a sanctuary to Adonis at the site. If true, Hadrian's activity would have been about 135 CE. Jerome further states that "the lover of Venus [Adonis] has been planted in the cave in which the infant messiah was born."

Jerome concluded that Hadrian did this untoward thing in order to insult Christianity. But is it hardly possible that a Christian shrine existed there before the time of Hadrian. After all, we have seen that there was no Bethlehem, that the cave was in a forest, and we know that the cult of Adonis was already well established, predating Christianity by centuries. One astonishing fact to which the church father witnesses, however, is entirely correct: the cave where Jesus was allegedly born was already a consecrated shrine, but to a different god.

We may ask, then, why the Christians of Constantine's time chose a center of pagan worship as the birthplace of Jesus? The answer to this question requires some investigation into the nature of the god Adonis.

⁴⁵ The birth stories of Matthew and Luke mention no cave. It is in second century extra-canonical works such as the Protevangelium of James (chp. 18) and the writings of Justin Martyr (Dial. With Trypho 78).

⁴⁶ In 347 CE Cyril of Jerusalem writes that "Bethlehem was enclosed by a forest until the constructions of Constantine." Information for this section is drawn partly from P. Welton, "Bethlehem und die Klage um Adonis." *Zeitschrift des deutschen Palästina-Vereins*, 99 (1983):189–203.

The name Adonis is a graecism of *Adonai*, Hebrew for “My Lord.” Adonis is not so much a unique divinity as the Levantine name for the Sumerian god Dumuzi, known in Hebrew as Tammuz. In Sumerian, Dumu-zi means “Son of Truth” or “True Son.” He was a water god who brought vegetation and prosperity to man, but who was killed and resurrected annually in a cycle that follows the seasons.⁴⁷ One of the hallmarks of Dumuzi-Tammuz-Adonis rites was the devotion of women, particularly the mourning for the dead (absent) god in the dry summer months. Women weeping for Tammuz at the gate of Jerusalem are even mentioned by the prophet Ezekiel (8:14–15).

There is presently some confusion in the scholarly literature regarding Dumuzi and an allegedly separate female deity, Dumuzi-Abzu, “True Daughter of the Abzu.” It is my suspicion that these two deities are aspects of one androgynous god—or, rather, of one god who has transcended gender. This element becomes significant in the gnosticism of late antiquity, as we see in passages where male and female no longer exist.⁴⁸ Transcending gender implies control of the passions—another theme much in evidence in gnostic Christian sources.⁴⁹

Even though Dumuzi was popularly known as the husband of Inanna, and Adonis as a youthful and beautiful male, the androgynous nature of the god was indeed part of Syrian religion:

In Syria where Adonis reigned, the cave of Bethlehem was the center of mysteries and celebrations of the androgynous god. Women came and mourned his/her mystical death. This place was consecrated to Astarte and Tammuz, in the sacred forest which surrounded it...

The cave of Adonis became the cave of Jesus. One divinity succeeded the other without popular belief being seriously troubled, or even being able to distinguish the elements which separated the one from the other. The same crowds which came to celebrate Adonis at the cave in Bethlehem now came to celebrate Jesus with equal enthusiasm, equal faith, knowing only that the symbol for the eternal sun was now being rejuvenated under a new name.⁵⁰

Since Paleolithic times man has descended into caves to contact the transcendent, as we witness in the famous cave paintings of Lascaux and other places in southern Europe.⁵¹ In the Bronze Age, Enki/Ea was master of the abzu, the underworld ocean representing gnosis. Wells and springs were openings of that abzu to the world above. Similarly, caves were sacred openings to the underworld, as we see in the mystery

⁴⁷ In some accounts Dumuzi/Tammuz descends into the underworld for six months of the year and is ‘brought back to life’ by Inanna.

⁴⁸ See, e.g., Gospel of Thomas 22; Mt 5:27–28; 19:11–12; Lk 23:29; Rev 14:3–5, etc.

⁴⁹ See ‘enkratite’ works including the Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of Philip, Book of Thomas the Contender, Exegesis of the Soul, Dialog of the Savior, Authoritative Teaching, and Testimony of Truth—all found at Nag Hammadi.

⁵⁰ H. Vincent and F. Abel, *Bethléem: Le Sanctuaire de la Nativité*. Paris: V. Lecoffre, 1914:12–13. Translation by RS.

⁵¹ Salm, “Pre-rational Religion,” and the writings of D. Lewis-Williams.

religions of late antiquity.⁵² It was there that hidden, secret wisdom was to be found, mediated by Sybils, chthonic deities, and the quintessential gnostic messenger from the underworld, the snake—an animal which lacks eyelids (is ever vigilant), which sloughs its skin (does not die), and which is perfectly formed to descend and ascend through crevasses in the ground.

In short, the Christian Church located the birthplace of the Son of God over a cave dedicated to Adonis, a cave which had metaphorically led to gnosis. No doubt this was for strategic reasons. After all, what better way exists to defeat paganism than to turn its holiest shrines into Christian ones?

The Church similarly celebrates the birth of Jesus on December 25, the birthday of Sol Invictus, the Unconquered Sun with which Mithra was identified. Since the Stone Age that day had marked a great annual celebration, the time when the sun's light visibly returns to man after the long summer/fall declination—the 'resurrection' of god.⁵³

In such ways, religions do not start from scratch, as it were, but import useful elements from older religions. Judaism had done something similar with "Bethlehem." This had been a mythical place representing the gate to gnosis, Beit-Laḥmu. Still mythical, it became the literary hometown of David. Thus, Jews and Christians transformed what had been precious to pagans into what is precious to them.

Ephrathah and 'crossing over'

In Jewish scripture, Bethlehem is sometimes equated with Ephrath/Ephrathah (Gen 35:19; 48:7; Ruth 4:11; Mic 5:2). Elsewhere, the latter is the "father" of Bethlehem (1 Chr 4:4). Both 'places' were not material settlements in Judah, Benjamin, or Ephraim, but mythical locales in pre-Israelite religion. Beit-Laḥmu was the home of the Laḥmu divinities, servants of the great god of hidden wisdom who guarded the 'gate' of his house. Hidden wisdom (gnosis) had long been symbolized by fresh water emerging from within and under the earth. Thus, it is no surprise that the Bethlehem known to Jewish scribes was noted for a well with special water, as cited in the biblical passage above.

The etymology of *Ephrath* (אפרת) is of some significance. Its root a/e-p-r (אפר) corresponds to the Babylonian-Assyrian *ebēru* (אבר) with the common exchange of labials *beth* and *pe*. *Ebēru* means "reach the other side, go across, through, or over."⁵⁴ This meaning conforms well to the 'gate to gnosis' that we have been discussing. The Hebrew root for "pass over, through, or pass on" is closely related: עבר ('br, with exchange of the gutturals *ayin* and *aleph*, also common).⁵⁵ The Mesopotamian e-b-r and Hebrew '-b-r correspond in meaning and have yielded e-p-r (→Ephrath).

⁵² See J. Ustinova, *Caves and the Ancient Greek Mind: Descending Underground in the Search for Ultimate Truth*. Oxford: University Press, 2009.

⁵³ This is four days after the theoretical winter solstice on Dec. 21. For four days before and four after the solstice, the sun's weak force appears unchanged.

⁵⁴ C. Bezold, *Babylonisch-Assyrisches Glossar*. Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1926, p 13; CAD vol. 20:10 ff., "ebēru"; cf. Drower and Macuch, *A Mandaic Dictionary* (Oxford, 1963) p. 4, "ABR I, "to get over, pass over, get through."

⁵⁵ BDB 716 ff.

The nominal form of Hebrew *ayin-beth-resh* signifies ‘the other side,’⁵⁶ the place one reaches when one has ‘crossed over.’ In a gnostic context this is the place of enlightenment, rest, and immortality. Here, then, must be the root meaning of the place *Ephrath*. It is the land of salvation on ‘the other side,’ to which *Beit-Lahmu* (Bethlehem) is the all-important gate of entry.

A gnostic and metaphorical interpretation of the imaginary *Bethlehem* and *Ephrath/Ephrathah* helps us make sense of the words “on the way to Ephrath” (and similar locutions) often employed by the Jewish scribe in conjunction with *Bethlehem*. The phrase occurs four times in the book of Genesis, always in association with the death and burial of Rachel:

[Jacob speaks.] “For when I came from Paddan, Rachel, alas, died in the land of Canaan *on the way*, while there was *still some distance to go to Ephrath*; and I buried her there *on the way to Ephrath*.”

(Gen 48:7, NRSV. Cf. 35:16, 19. Emphasis added.)

All this insistence on the proximity of Bethlehem and Ephrath reveals an unsuspected poignancy when read from a symbolic and gnostic perspective. Rachel died while “still some distance to go to Ephrath.” Interpreted spiritually, this means she had not quite reached ‘the land of salvation’—a condition generally applicable to humans, whose lives indeed usually end with some measure of disappointment.

The blessing of the Bethlehemites upon Boaz, in the book of Ruth, now also receives an added dimension: “May you produce children in Ephrathah” they all wish in unison (Ruth 4:11). No greater blessing, indeed, could be wished upon a future parent.

We have seen that the Hebrew root ‘-b-r (here vocalized for convenience as *eber*) is linguistically related to *Ephrath* and means “pass over, through, or pass on.” *Eber* denotes the movement of people from one place to another, but particularly over or through water.⁵⁷ One immediately thinks of the Hebrew exodus from Egypt, and of their passage across the Jordan. Amazingly, the name “Hebrew” (עברי) itself derives from this very root.⁵⁸ This is further attestation that, in the earliest stage of its formation—a stage which took place in the gnostic-imbued region of Midian⁵⁹—the Hebrews referred to themselves as those who ‘crossed over.’

This interpretation is supported by the fact that recent scholarship has failed to find any historical evidence of the Israelite exodus out of Egypt.⁶⁰ Though figurative, that exodus is across water, and we have now identified two powerful gnostic symbols at the basis of the exodus story—‘water’ (= gnosis) and ‘crossing over’ (= attaining the land of salvation, *Ephrath*). The Hebrews were followers of Moses, and he (whether historical or not) may have been an ‘awake and watchful’ leader who had crossed over from ignorance to enlightenment—a Natsarene like the mythical Noah.

⁵⁶ BDB 719, no. 5676.

⁵⁷ BDB 717.

⁵⁸ BDB 720, no. 5680.

⁵⁹ Nielsen chp. 4.

⁶⁰ N. Lemche, *Prelude to Israel's Past*. Peabody: Hendrickson 1998:54–55.

After the Exodus, crossing the Jordan River becomes symbolic of attaining ‘the promised land.’ The Jordan is crossed literally in Jewish scriptures, sometimes literally and figuratively in the Pseudepigrapha, and metaphorically in Mandaean scriptures. Joshua (= “Jesus”), Moses’ lieutenant, crosses the river with the Israelites while “the priests who bore the ark of the covenant of Yahweh stood on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan” (Jos 3:17). No clearer image is possible of Yahweh metaphorically dominating what was thoroughly gnostic territory: the middle of the river of gnosis.

The Natsarene is metaphorically the one who crosses the Flood, the Sea of Reeds, or the Jordan River with impunity. When we consider that water was a symbol of gnosis already in Neolithic times,⁶¹ then ‘passing across (or through) the waters’ becomes a metaphor for attaining enlightenment. Dipping into water is dipping into wisdom. This concept eventually led to the rite of baptism.

Crossing a body of water is a very ancient metaphor for the human being who seeks to understand his/her material limitations and to transcend them. In the Hebrew stories we can still detect the gnostic skeleton: water (wisdom), under lunar influence, crushes those who have not befriended it—those who do not have secret knowledge. They attempt to cross over but are unable. However, the Natsarene—like Noah, Moses, and Joshua—understands the secret ways of the divine and crosses the barrier unscathed.

The demise of gnosticism

Scant elements of the gnostic worldview remain in the Jewish scriptures. They are hidden, to be ferreted out from among the obloquy heaped upon gnosticism by the later scribes. The meaning of old gnostic symbols was lost, perhaps unknown even to many in later antiquity. When the Jewish religion turned against its gnostic roots, the Aaronides of Jerusalem invented an impassable chasm between man and god, one *not* to be crossed. Thus Judaism made an about-face, from a people who at first celebrated ‘crossing over’ from the material to the transcendent, to a people who strictly forbade even the presumption of this possibility.

In Jewish scripture, Yahweh is repeatedly victorious over those who try to see, reach, or be like “god” (cf. The Tower of Babel; Adam seeking the fruit of knowledge, etc). Yahweh is also victorious over the land-serpent (a symbol of wisdom as early as paleolithic times) called Behemoth, and especially over the water-serpent—the ‘monster’ Leviathan. It has been suggested that the name *Leviathan* is related to *Levi*. This would reflect the ill fortune that befell the Levites with the ascendancy of the Aaronides in post-exilic times (see below). In brief, even though the earliest Hebrew self-definition was gnostic, the religion soon and determinedly betrayed those roots. It exchanged *understanding* ‘that which is’ for *obedience to* ‘That Which Is’ (*Yahweh*). Worship of god replaced understanding of life. I suggest that this inevitably occurs when a religion reaches a certain level of organization, at which stage a powerful priesthood finds obedience necessary and independent searching threatening.

Jewish scripture repudiates in no uncertain terms gnostic elements such as ‘becoming like god’ (“all-knowing,” “enlightened”). In this connection, it is instructive to compare the various flood stories. In the older version, Ea/Enki confers divinity upon Utnapishtim, the Mesopotamian Noah, with the following words: “Formerly Utnapishtim was a human being, but now he and his wife have become gods like us. Let

⁶¹ Water from the ground gave life to men, animals, and plants. The source of the underground waters (the subterranean *abzu*) was the home of the divine, the place of unchanging wisdom, the location of the afterlife, and the resting place of moon and sun.

Utnapishtim reside far away, at the mouth of the rivers” (Gilg. XI:192 f).⁶² None of this is found in the Jewish version, where Yahweh merely blesses Noah, whose progeny then populate the earth (Gen 9:1).

The second chapter of Genesis also manifests the strident Jewish rejection of gnosticism. “The tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat,” Yahweh thunders to Adam. “For in the day that you eat of it you shall die” (Gen 2:16–17). Adam, however, eats of the fruit and does not die but in fact gains precious knowledge. He does not succumb to intimidation but essentially gives the lie to Yahweh. “See,” Yahweh then remonstrates, “the man has become like one of us,⁶³ knowing good and evil; and now he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever” (Gen 3:22). This is jealousy of man’s potential, pure and simple. It shows Yahweh essentially as man’s opponent, henceforth doing what he can to limit man’s possibilities and to prevent his ‘reaching out to eat from the tree of life.’ Via the pens of Jewish scribes, Yahweh ejects man from the Garden of Eden and posts cherubim to guard “the tree of life” (3:24). Now there is a chasm between man and god, and the basic message of Yahweh is “Do not approach!” This is diametrically contrary to the gnostic message. In addition, Yahweh lays a number of frightful punishments upon man for his insufferable disobedience (3:16–19). In sum, these verses establish the basic foundation of the Jewish faith, and reveal it to be a religion of intimidation and limited possibilities.

Bethlehem, Dan, Levites, and Aaronides

A curious story in Judges 17–18 links Bethlehem and Dan, the settlement far to the north at the source of the Jordan River. The story is constructed in such a way that its intention is inescapable: Bethlehem of Judah was the origin of the ‘wayward’ priesthood of Dan.

Dan (known as Laish in pre-Israelite times) was a fabled religious center with its own priesthood. This sanctuary lay at the headwaters of the river Jordan and at the foot of Mt. Hermon. The area had for many centuries (even millennia) been known far and wide as an international cultic center, to the extent that even the ancient Gilgamesh journeyed from Mesopotamia to the “cedar mountain” of Lebanon in search of wisdom. There, he found Utnapishtim, the hero of the flood story, now living his immortal existence far from ordinary man.

In Jewish scripture we encounter much polemic against the northern sanctuary. Anti-Danite material is found in all three branches of the Tanakh: the Torah, Prophets, and Writings. The story in Judges 17–18 is but one example. It contrives to explain how Dan, dedicated to idol worship, came to be a part of Israel and, furthermore, why it was perpetually under a curse. The story imputes the origins of Danite religion to a Levite from Bethlehem. Without entering into an extended discussion here, we note that this is also an example of hostility directed by the Aaronide priests of Jerusalem (who redacted the Torah) against the “Levites,” the landless clan of Israelite priests scattered throughout Palestine.

The story under consideration is briefly as follows. Micah, a man “from the hill country of Ephraim” keeps an idol in his house. If this weren’t reprehensible enough in

⁶² Ziusudra attains “Dilmun,” the land of the blessed (Lambert and Millard 145). Atrahasis “lived in the temple of Ea, my lord” (Atr. 22.421,7).

⁶³ The plural “us” shows that Yahweh was still but one among many divinities.

priestly Jewish eyes, we learn that the silver out of which the idol was made had been stolen by Micah from his own mother and, additionally, that the silver was under a curse (17:1–4).

“To live wherever he could find a place,” a Levite “of Bethlehem in Judah” arrives at Micah's house in the “hill country of Ephraim.” Micah offers to hire him to be his priest. The salary is “ten pieces of silver a year,” and we can readily infer that this payment is from the silver which had been cursed.

Judges 18 introduces the Danites who are still wandering in the south and looking for a permanent home. The parallel with the Levite of Bethlehem who is also looking for a home cannot be coincidental. At 18:3 the Danites arrive at Micah's house, and “they recognized the voice of the young Levite.” In other words, there was a relationship between the Danites and the Levite when the latter was still in his hometown of Bethlehem. This further links the Danites with this particular Levite, and both with Bethlehem of Judah.

At 18:6 the Levite, now acting as priest of Micah, is a mouthpiece of Yahweh. He encourages the Danites in their mission to find a home and it is immediately thereafter that the Danites descend upon Laish/Dan. In this way, the author has shaped his story so that the Levite from Bethlehem plays a critical role in the establishment of the northern settlement of Dan by the Israelites.

The priestly author now carefully describes how the accursed silver was made into the idol venerated at Dan (18:30–31). In other words, in the mind of the author, Dan lay under a curse from its inception. Furthermore, the priests who ministered at Dan were likewise under a curse. They are explicitly named: “Jonathan son of Gershom, son of Moses, and his sons.” It can be no coincidence that the Gershonites inhabited the extreme northern part of Israel and also portions of the Bashan east of the Jordan. This includes the area around Dan, and is familiar to us as “Galilee.”⁶⁴

The entire story in Judges 18–19 can be seen as a self-legitimation exercise written by the Aaronides in Jerusalem against the age-old priesthood resident at the sanctuary of Dan. Our interest focuses particularly on an aspect of the Micah story that has received scant scholarly attention: the connection between Bethlehem, the “hill country of Ephraim,” and Dan. These three geographical entities are linked in their adversarial position vis-a-vis the Aaronides: (1) Dan is the location of the delegitimized northern cult; (2) Ephraim is territory encompassed by Samaria—a region long delegitimized in the eyes of Jerusalem; and (3) Bethlehem, according to the story under discussion, is the hometown of the Levite who inspired the idolatrous cult that eventually located at Dan, and which did so via Samaria.

There is not space here to explore the importance of Dan/Galilee as a famous gnostic cult center already in the third millennium BCE. Issuing from the mountain above Dan, the Jordan was especially sacred, its water a pre-eminent symbol of gnosis. The Jordan was the gnostic river *par excellence*. Dipping into it (“baptism”) was symbolically the equivalent of enlightenment.

The great mountain was itself the original Zion (Tsion), known also as Hermon and Senir. In the Bronze and Iron Ages, “the entrance to the cave of night” was thought to be located there, for over that mountain the sun descended into the western sea for its nightly journey under the earth. Here, in other words, were the gates to the underworld.

⁶⁴ Galilee extended east of the Jordan, as we see from the description of Josephus (Wars 3.3.1).

This was where the Laḥmu deities had their home. Here, metaphorically speaking, was the first “Bethlehem.”

In the Micah story, a Levite provides the connection between Bethlehem and Dan. This suggests that Levites were somehow implicated in gnosticism. This should come as no surprise, for Nielsen has shown that Moses, a Levite (Ex 2:1–2), was a devotee of the gnostic moon religion indigenous to North Arabia, which he learned from the *Kāhin* Jethro in Midian.⁶⁵

If the Levites were indeed linked in some way to gnosticism, this would in great measure clarify the hostility directed at them in the Torah, and why the Levites are demeaned and subordinated to the Aaronides in no uncertain terms. Commenting on Num 18:2–7, E. Rivkin writes: “The Levites are to function as Aaron’s servants and under penalty of death are prohibited from burning sacrifices at the altar.”⁶⁶ By Aaronides is meant the aloof and ritualistic post-exilic priesthood centered in the Jerusalem Temple.

The so-called Priestly author is the mouthpiece of the Aaronides. Much of Exodus (25–31; 35–40), all of Leviticus, and Numbers are attributed to his hand. The Priestly author is responsible for elevating the Aaronides over the Levites. In these texts Moses pales before Aaron, while the latter and the Aaronides are the principal concern of Yahweh, whose overwhelming focus and love is on Aaron, his sons, the cult, and the tabernacle. Rivkin writes: “We must, therefore, conclude that the Aaronides come to power with the finalized Pentateuch and, as such, are their own creation” (IDB).

The priestly Aaronides, centered in Jerusalem, are the post-exilic religious hegemonists who took authority away from the pre- and concurrently-existing Levites. By “their own creation,” Rivkin means that the Aaronides invented their own pedigree, invented their status as Levites (for Aaron was supposedly himself a Levite), and in this way they took over from the ancient and ‘true’ Levites the administration of the Temple and essentially of Judaism.

The account noted above in which a Levite from Bethlehem goes northwards to Dan with accursed silver is an Aaronide story, at once pejorative of Bethlehem, of the Levites, and of Dan. The Aaronides could not exclude the non-Jerusalem based Levites from the cult—for Levi was one of the twelve sons of Jacob, and his descendants had long been in the land carrying out priestly functions. But they could, and did, exclude those Levites from approaching “to offer incense before Yahweh” (Num 16:40).

It would appear, from our inferences, that the non-Jerusalem Levites were indeed Hebrews, but gnostic-leaning Hebrews. We can also speculate that gnosticism became ‘heretical’ with the ascendancy of the highly centralized Aaronidism of Jerusalem in the post-Exilic period (c. 450-400 BCE). It is at this point in the organization of the religion that Judaism betrayed its gnostic roots, as mentioned above. Henceforth, the non-Jerusalem Levites constituted a surviving vestige of the original Hebrew religion, of the religion of Moses, of North Arabia—and of Dan. It is those Levites who carried on the torch of gnosticism in more or less heterodox and ‘hidden’ traditions, represented by a number of works in the Jewish pseudepigrapha (above all, the Enoch literature). That literature represents a force which powerfully influenced early Christianity, including its anti-Jerusalem and anti-cultic aspects (cf. Mk 11:15–19; 7:6, 15, etc).

⁶⁵ Nielsen Chp. 2:139–142.

⁶⁶ IDB, Suppl. volume, “Aaron, Aaronides.”

According to this scenario, the decentralized and landless Levites represented a heterodox Judaism vilified at every turn by the ‘normative’ Jerusalem-bound Aaronides. The Korah episode illustrates Aaronide animosity. Korah, of Levitical descent and supported by other Levites, dared to challenge his subordination to the Aaronides and demanded full priestly status. The Priestly writer fashioned his story (Num 16) in such a way that a divine sign would determine who would be allowed to approach Yahweh—i.e., control the Temple and take pre-eminence in representing Israel.

The divine sign was not long in coming. The ground opened up and swallowed Korah and his levitical allies, together with their wives and children, “and all these went down alive to Sheol; the earth closed over them, and they perished from the midst of the assembly” (vv. 32–33). The purpose of the story is then stated: “a reminder to the Israelites that no outsider, who is not of the descendants of Aaron, shall approach to offer incense before Yahweh” (v. 40). It was no longer sufficient to be merely a Levite—one had to be a descendent of Aaron. Thus, insiders and outsiders exchanged places. The latecomers and true outsiders, the Aaronides (whose Levitical pedigree was possibly fabricated), now defined themselves as insiders; while the rest of the long-standing Levites who had worked among the people for centuries—the true insiders—now became outsiders. Henceforth, the Jerusalem Aaronides wielded unchallenged authority within the priestly clan of Levi and over the Temple (Num 17:1–13). Until the rise of the Pharisees, they were pre-eminent in Israelite religion.

Watchfulness, gnosis, and Christian scripture

A review of the meaning of the root n-ts-r shows that the Natsarene’s ability to attain wisdom and ‘cross over,’ as discussed above, depends on an inner propensity to somehow be watchful and alert. We have discussed how, in Jewish scripture, Yahweh punishes the one who is not prepared, so that an act of nature or of god/Yahweh appears as a sudden catastrophe (pp. 14–15 above).

The New Testament also contains sayings and parables which emphasize precisely this. The divine will appear suddenly, at the most unlikely and inconvenient times (midnight, when you least expect it, etc.). God chooses to appear when men are in deep spiritual sleep, and he rewards those that are ‘awake’ at such times (Mt 25:1 ff). Being found metaphorically awake or asleep is the judgment.

The Gospel of Mark is especially fulsome in enjoining ‘watchfulness’ at several points in Jesus’ ministry. Among pertinent passages, the best known is perhaps the scene in the Garden of Gethsemane (14:32 ff). Jesus enjoins the disciples to “remain here, and watch” (γρηγορεῖτε) while he prays. The disciples are unable to do so and fall “asleep.”

The First Evangelist also writes: “Watch therefore—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning—lest he come *suddenly* [ἐξαίφνης] and find you asleep” (Mk 13:35–36).

The Matthean evangelist illustrates the suddenness of the Lord precisely through the story of the Flood:

“As were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they did not know until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of man. . . Watch therefore, for you do not know on

what day your Lord is coming. . . For the Son of man is coming *at an hour you do not expect.*" (Mt 24:37 f., emphasis added.)

The association of the Flood with divine retribution can be no coincidence. It shows that to ancient Sumerians and early Christians alike, sudden and devastating divine retribution was the lot of those who failed to be watchful.

The Third Evangelist portrays the sudden coming of the Son of man as the eschatological judgment:

"But take heed to yourselves lest your hearts be weighted down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you *suddenly* like a snare; for it will come upon all who dwell upon the face of the whole earth. But watch at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of man." (Lk 21:34–36, emphasis added.)

At the beginning of this article we briefly discussed how one is to remove the element of 'surprise,' the 'suddenness' of the appearance of the divine (the Son of man). To repeat, the key is knowledge into the ways of the divine. The wise person knows, and thus the action of the divine does not catch him off guard. Being watchful he avoids ruin. Being watchful, he also has insight unseen by his peers—*gnosis*. The New Testament relates that one is to metaphorically prepare for the divine gaze *precisely where and when one least expects*, as did the wise maidens at midnight (Mt 25:1 ff). Watchfulness bequeaths knowledge and understanding of that which is hidden. In this way, one corrects the least visible deficiencies—those that are inner (Mk 7:21). In sum, one is perfect (Mt 5:48).

It is impossible to overemphasize the importance of watchfulness, *natsar*, in gnosticism. In late antiquity, the mantle of gnosticism passed to the Natsraia (Mandeans) and to the Natsarenes (pre-Christians). Their names betray the Semitic root that, already for millennia, had been associated with a preparedness and hidden knowledge that *saves*. For gnostics, water was a sacred symbol of gnosis. They were known in antiquity as belonging to baptist sects, and they frequently immersed in water to memorialize and re-enact their central sacrament, the fabled attainment of gnosis ('enlightenment').

The Mandeans venerate John "the Baptizer," a gnostic figure who dipped others in water—that is, he metaphorically introduced them into the way of gnosis. John's teaching came from gnosis (water), out of *Bethlehem* (the gate to gnosis), from *Ephrathah* (the land of salvation)—even as his ancient namesake, Oannes, the half-fish half-man of Mesopotamian legend, emerged from the sea to teach the Sumerians wisdom more than two millennia earlier.⁶⁷ John preached a hopeful and revolutionary message—that salvation (*Yeshua*, "Jesus") is now and always at hand, readily available to each and every person through watchfulness and the seeking of inner gnosis. This is the hidden knowledge, the *nitsirtu* known already in Mesopotamian religion two millennia earlier.

The gnostic prophet, John the Baptizer, was the quintessential Natsarene.

⁶⁷ Cf. The *Babyloniaca* of Berossus, the Mesopotamian priest of the third century BCE.

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