

The Old Arabian Moon Religion
And the Mosaic Tradition

(1904)

by

Ditlef Nielsen

Chapter Five:
Wandering in the Wilderness

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Foreword

In this fifth chapter, Nielsen shows that the pentateuchal Exodus accounts incorporate elements that were part of the lunar religion of northern Arabia in pre-Israelite times. The crossing of the Sea of Reeds occurred during the days of darkness preceding new moon. On the other hand, the expressions “face of Yahweh” and “glory of Yahweh” refer to the full moon, as does also the “throne of Yahweh” (p. 154).

The theophany at Mt. Sinai was simultaneous with the return of the divine light at new moon. Nielsen shows that the sacred mountain was not in the southern part of the peninsula which bears its name, but in fact is located in Northern Arabia.

The sabbath days were aligned with the moon’s phases, and reflect an old custom known since the third millennium. The moon itself was symbolized by an eagle in pre-Israelite religion, as also reflected in Jewish scripture (p. 157).

A major portion of this chapter deals with events at Mt. Sinai. Nielsen shows that these, too, are thoroughly consistent with the mysterious astral religion practiced in North Arabia, particularly with the new moon celebration.

In a footnote (no. 22), I touch upon the Kenites, “ancient smiths and metal workers” whose obscurity belies their importance in early Yahwist religion. Midian was an international center of metal mining, and the Kenites apparently contributed much to early Israelite religion—apart from the fact that Moses’ father-in-law was a Kenite (Judg 1:16; 4:11).

The original pagination is indicated in brackets, e.g. [23]. Occasionally, a few words of clarification have been added within the text. Headings have also been added for clarity.

—René Salm

Chapter Five
Wandering in the Wilderness

Contents

4	The Exodus
7	A false Sinai
8	Institution of the sabbath
9	In the wilderness of the moon god Sin
12	God's appearance

Character list

'	= "a"	(Heb. <i>alef</i>)
'	= (stop)	(Heb. <i>ayin</i>)
ḥ	= "ch"	(Heb. <i>het</i>)
ṣ	= "ts"	(Heb. <i>tsade</i>)
ṣ̄	= "sh"	(Heb. <i>shin</i>)
ṭ	= "th"	(Heb. <i>tav</i>)

Long vowels are marked by a superscript macron.

The Exodus

[143] Afterward Moses and Aaron went to pharaoh and said, “Thus says Yahweh, the God of Israel, ‘Let my people go, so that they may celebrate a festival [*jaħoggū*] to me in the wilderness’... Then [the people] said, “The God of the Hebrews has revealed himself to us; let us go a three days’ journey into the wilderness to sacrifice to Yahweh our God, or he will fall upon us with pestilence or sword.” (Ex 5:1, 3)

This passage is the first time in the Hebrew scriptures where we encounter the word *ħajj*, the customary word for “pilgrimage” in Arabia even to this day. The *ħajj* follows the spring celebration to Yahweh (Ex 12–13). According to Arabian custom, special donations of cattle are delivered to the temple on this feast day, under threat of divine punishment.

According to the biblical account, the Pharaoh wishes to prevent the Hebrew exodus. He maintains that this festival can also be celebrated in Egypt (Ex 8:25). However, Moses and Aaron instruct him that the festival can only be celebrated at certain sacred sites. Because the Pharaoh fears that the Hebrews will flee, he wants to hold their cattle in security (10:24). Moses objects—it is from the cattle that the sacrifices are to be made to Yahweh, but which precise animals are to be selected he knows not yet. [144] On account of the Pharaoh’s temporizing, the ten plagues take place. They do not affect the Hebrews, only the Egyptians, and culminate in the death of all first born of Egypt. We recall that the new year’s celebration was a feast of thanks for newborn animals, and that the firstborn were brought as offerings to Yahweh. Were this not to happen, then Yahweh would take ‘the firstborn’ himself—in this case, the firstborn of the Egyptians.

In the same passage we encounter the first biblical references to the calendar. This month (later known as *Nisan*) is the first of the year (Ex 12:2) and corresponds to the Arabian *Ragab*, which opens the summer half of the year. In Arabia, the sacred period began at full moon in the month of Ragab. The entire month was holy and the minimal offering was a sheep, similar to the substitute offering for those who could not attend the Spring *ħajj* or fulfill the greatest ritual requirements of the sanctuary.

The sheep’s blood was sprinkled on the stone, and the flesh consumed by the donor family within a restricted period of time. The animals to be offered were known as “the elect,” for they had been selected and marked beforehand.

The *Ragab* celebration was held at the same time of year when the Mineans and Sabeans held extravagant ceremonies. The moon’s phases dictated the timing. The moon’s influence is evident even in the biblical account, and the celebration reached its zenith at full moon. [145] The offering was properly a ‘full moon offering,’ similar to the manner in which the Hebrews celebrated the Ragab-festival while in Egypt.

The biblical calendar, like the later Arabian calendar, has lunar months alternating between 29 and 30 days. The fourteenth day is the middle of the month—the full moon. On this day the lamb is sacrificed (Ex 12:6), its blood sprinkled on the doorposts instead of on the temple stones, and its flesh consumed by the Hebrew family at night, with none to remain after the following morning (Ex 12:7–10). Night is the sacred time. When the moon disappears (in the morning) the sacred rites end.

The day of full moon is the actual day of the *ħajj*. The seven subsequent days—from the fourteenth to the twenty-first (that is, from full moon ○ until the last quarter ●)—are

marked by the consumption of unleavened bread, *matzoth*. The first and last days of this period are particularly solemn holidays when no work is permitted (Ex 12:14–20). In other words, the day of the full moon, as also the day of the last quarter, are days of rest—even as were the sabbath days in the ancient cuneiform texts of Babylonia.¹

The animal to be sacrificed was selected from the herd some time beforehand, that is, on the tenth day of the month (Ex 12:3). The parallel with the tenth day of the Arabian autumn celebration is noteworthy, particularly since the main holiday and the ensuing holiday are associated with the full moon and the last quarter. This leads to the implication that the tenth day was originally the day of the first quarter ☾ which, as we have seen,² fell on the tenth day of every second month. In any case, a sacred period of ten days is specified, as in the great Arabian autumn celebrations.

[146] According to the biblical account, Yahweh carried out his punishment on the fourteenth day. It can be no coincidence that this was simultaneous with the great celebratory sacrifice on the night of the full moon. Yahweh revealed himself at midnight, “goes out through Egypt and kills all the firstborn,” excepting the children of the Hebrews. The blood on their doorposts shows that they have observed the sacred rites (Ex 11:4–7; 12:12–13, 23, 29).

In these passages, the verbs *yaša’* and *‘bar* (“go out” and “go past”) describe the movements of god. These are astronomical terms used in conjunction with the motions of heavenly bodies. Their use in the biblical account shows that god’s activity, as in old Arabia, was astral.

The moon moves over Egypt from east to west. On the night when it is full, it reaches its brightest at midnight, when the celebrations below also culminate. That is the time of god’s judgment.

Terrified on account of this horror, the Pharaoh finally allows the Exodus to take place. The Hebrews leave on this very night. They do so in a swarm, accompanied by children, animals large and small, goods, as well as silver and gold objects (revealed by the subsequent injunctions of Moses at Mt. Horeb). [147] They move eastwards, towards the Gulf of Suez and the so-called Sinai peninsula (Ex 12:35–38; 13:17–20). “Yahweh went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night” (Ex 13:21).

This description resembles that found in the royal annals of Assyria, where the national god precedes the army in campaigns, *alik pani-ia*, even as the Hebrew national god shows the way, *holek lipne-hem* [“going in front of them”]. The verb *alaku*, “go,” Hebrew *halak*, describes the movement of heavenly bodies in the cuneiform records. We are speaking here not of the apparent movement from east to west, shared with the fixed stars which “rise” and “fall” each night, but of the movement of the planets in reference to the fixed stars, which is from west to east.³ Thus, god was symbolized as a moving object in the heavens, one which served to show the way to the ancients (who had no compass) in their distant travels. Since it also “shone upon them by night,” we must be speaking of the moon which, as we have seen, completes its rapid heavenly

¹ See Nielsen Chp. 2:9–13.

² Nielsen Chp. 2:17.

³ Nielsen Chp. 2:9–10.

trajectory from west to east in the course of a month. In the Exodus account the Hebrews move from west to east, following god—the moon—which goes “before them.”

Arabian caravans generally moved by night. We can readily understand why the start of a journey took place at full moon, for a voyage into unfamiliar terrain required good light. At new moon one could not travel, for there is no light at that time. [148] We can intuit the caravan leader’s general strategy. The moon rose on the eastern horizon becoming weaker and weaker each night, and it also rose later and later. Thus, as the nights darkened, the “moonrise” approached the time of sunrise. After seven days the moon rose at midnight and appeared in its third quarter, ☾. After fourteen days, the moon completely disappeared into the light of the sun.

It was at this time of the month that the Hebrews reached Pi-Hahiroth (Ex 14:2, 9), at the northern end of the Gulf of Suez. There they dallied until the moon reappeared after three days, so that they could continue their journey. It was during this hiatus that the Egyptians set upon them, and the Hebrews were forced to continue their journey in complete darkness.

The angel of God who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them. It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel. And so the cloud was there with the darkness, and it lit up the night; one did not come near to the other all night. (Ex 14:19–20)

These words indicate that the hiatus and subsequent breaking of camp took place at new moon. The “angel of God” can only be the moon. It went before the Hebrews, in an easterly direction, approached the rising sun on the horizon, passed the conjunction, and then appeared once again at night, but now on the western horizon and after sunset. So, at first the moon was in front, and then “behind” the Hebrews, between them and the Egyptians.

While the nights were pitch dark the caravans of necessity stayed still. Then the moon would reappear on the western horizon, “lighting up the night.” At that time of month, however, the moon set soon after the sun. It pulled the water with it, resulting in an ebb tide. [149] We have seen that ebb and flood are especially pronounced in equatorial regions, and particularly in the flat coastal stretches of the Red Sea. At new moon the ebb is stronger yet, for the pulling force of the sun is added to that of the moon.⁴ These are regular phenomena of nature, well known to the dwellers of the area. However, the biblical account contains extraordinary and unusual assertions: “Yahweh drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land (*ḥaraba*)” (Ex 14:21). This recalls the account of the flood, in that the tides are exaggerated both in degree and duration. We may surmise that numerous constellations were aligned, resulting in an extraordinary ebb and subsequent (equally extraordinary) flood.⁵

⁴ Nielsen Chps. 1:24; 2:6.

⁵ When the moon aligns with the sun, notable effects occur on the tides. However, the alignment of planets and “constellations” cannot account for the extraordinary occurrences depicted in the flood and Exodus stories. Nielsen explains the latter event as a particularly pronounced ebb tide which rendered a significant stretch of coastland temporarily passable to the Israelites, rather than as a “parting” of the sea—a dramatic touch added by the biblical author.—RS

The pious wanderer, whose god is named *Horeb*, “God of Dryness”—after his power to move the sea—saw the power of his god in this great ebb, trusted therein, and hurried in darkness across the temporary seafloor, fortunately arriving at the further shore. The Egyptians, for their part, upon the arrival of morning light perceived that their quarry had disappeared and attempted the same maneuver. However, too many hours had passed, and they were now caught in the ensuing great flood tide (Ex 14:21–28).⁶

A false Sinai

In the unusual crossing of the waters, god showed himself to be both *Horeb*, “God of Dryness,” and god of the Hebrews. [150] Before they proceeded, the Hebrews worshipped their god on Arabian soil in a joyous celebration captured in poetry and song (Ex 15). Thereafter, the great caravan set again in motion and proceeded into the great wastes of the Sinai peninsula.

The earliest version of the Hebrew exodus, along with the site of Mount Sinai, have demonstrably been transferred southwards. The southern site, indeed, rests on (mistaken) pre-Christian ideas regarding the mountain in question. Christian monastic tradition interpreted the biblical account in such a way that the Hebrews stopped in a barren and mountainous region near the tip of the peninsula. Early in the common era, they named a distinctive mountain in the rugged range ‘Sinai,’ and also named the entire peninsula after it. Early Christians built a monastery at the foot of the mountain, one which has been visited by innumerable pious Christians and Jews in the succeeding centuries. The imposing mountain towers above and has long been known as the site at which God spoke with Moses. When one reflects how easily such traditions are localized in the Levant, how many pilgrims have long since confirmed the site, and how many sacred burials can now be found there, then one cannot credit this post-Christian tradition with scientific merit at all.

According to geographical data in the biblical account, on the other hand, the mountain under discussion lies to the east of the peninsula. Furthermore, the Hebrews would have traveled along the usual caravan road directly through the peninsula to Aqaba—a well-trodden route pilgrims follow to this day on their way from Egypt to the Moslem shrines in Mecca. According to this scenario (first proposed by R. Smend in 1893) the Hebrews were never in the south of the peninsula. [151] The oasis Elim at which they stayed (Ex 15:27) would be the present Kal’at en Nachl, roughly midway through their journey and where caravans currently generally rest.

The next scene in the biblical account played out during full moon. The caravan was now in the vicinity of the sacred “wilderness of *Sīn*.” It was the fifteenth day of the second month following their flight from Egypt. The Hebrews were grumbling against Moses and Aaron on account of the lack of food (Ex 16:1–3). Moses then had the people gather before the “face of Yahweh” and look to the east where “the glory of

⁶ We should not forget that the flood and exodus accounts are developments of a primal spiritual metaphor, namely, “reaching the other side.” In numerous gnostic accounts crossing the river is a euphemism for attaining transcendence, gnosis. In Mandaean and other writings, one narrative element of that figurative crossing will be the ‘rolling back’ of the waters (e.g. of the Jordan)—as if the gnostic has learned the ability to reverse nature and make water go uphill. Interpreted, this means that the enlightened person is not subject to natural forces but has transcended them.

Life-giving (flowing) water was associated with life-giving gnosis already in the neolithic era. Man soon fastened upon the fish as a symbol of the gnostic ‘victor,’ for the fish (a) lives in water; and (b) is able to swim upstream, that is, to ‘go against the flow.’ Already in early Babylonian seal impressions we encounter the god of water, Ea/Enki, from whom emanate streams in which fish swim upwards.—RS

Yahweh appeared in the cloud” (Ex 16:9–10). Given the time of the month, this must have happened precisely when the full moon rose into the sky.

Notable here are the theological terms used, which apply to the full moon—the “face of Yahweh” (*penē yahwe*) and the “glory of Yahweh” (*kavōd yahwe*). God miraculously produced the animals to be offered, namely, a swarm of quails which “covered the camp.” The following morning manna fell from the sky (Ex 16:13–21). This is the prescription for the usual full moon offering with subsequent consumption of bread. The previous full moon offering (Ragab) in Egypt employed, we recall, unleavened bread. In both cases the sacrifice and eating of meat occurred upon onset of darkness, for the divine symbol (the moon) appears during the night, the sacred time.

Institution of the sabbath

Even more telling are certain calendar indicators. [152] Following the Ragab celebration, no work is to be conducted during the full moon nor one week later at the last quarter ☾. These holidays, however, are not merely part of the sacred calendar, but also pertain to society at large. Thus, Yahweh says to Moses, “I am going to rain bread from heaven for you, and each day the people shall go out and gather enough for that day. In that way I will test them, whether they will follow my instruction or not. On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather on other days” (Ex. 16:4–5).

The people do accordingly. Moses explains that they collect twice as much on the sixth day because the following day is the sabbath, the holy day of God’s rest (Ex 16:21–26).

On the seventh day some of the people went out to gather, and they found none. Yahweh said to Moses, “How long will you refuse to keep my commandments and instructions? See! Yahweh has given you the sabbath, therefore on the sixth day he gives you food for two days; each of you stay where you are; do not leave your place on the seventh day.”
(Ex 16:27–30)

This depiction tells us that we are not dealing with festival rites, but with the weekly celebration of the day of rest. This recurring rest day is aligned with the moon’s phases and closes each lunar week. In the biblical passage, the six days of manna-collection follow the full moon. The seventh day—the day of the moon’s last quarter—is observed by resting. God shows by example and instructs, in that he himself rests on this day, while he had worked double on the prior day.⁷ [153] The Hebrews, too, are required to rest on these sabbaths, for as god rests, so does man. The *šabat* was already known in the third millennium BCE as the official rest day, and originated probably in Arabia.⁸

⁷ He rests, in fact, during the completion of the four visible phases of the moon: first quarter, full moon, last quarter, and new moon. Here is a key to much Mesopotamian iconography. These four sacred sabbaths when the moon god rests are depicted in Sumerian and Babylonian iconography as the moon god (Ea/Enki) *seated* on his throne. On that day he is in his “station,” not only resting but also receiving the veneration of man (depicted as a devout visitor who is presented to the seated moon god). See Nielsen Chp. 2:68–70.—RS

⁸ Nielsen Chp. 2:70–71, 87–88.

For the first time the Hebrews were in Arabia, and here we find the word *šabat* used also for the first time in the bible—in fact, in its authentic Old Arabian form. We have already encountered the term in the cuneiform inscriptions and have explained it as a borrowing from Arabia. Its further appearance in the Hebrew scriptures in connection with Midian decidedly attests to the Arabian provenance of the term.

At any rate, *šabat* is not Hebrew. The Babylonian form *šubtu* corresponds to the Hebrew *šebet*, “sit calmly” (infinitive of *yašab*). “Each of you stay [*šebu*, שבו] where you are, do not leave your place on the seventh day” (Ex 16:29).

The meaning of the word as “stay still” in contrast to “move” corresponds to the astronomical use of the word.⁹ [154] The people were not to circulate, and the Hebrew priests took pains to set forth how many steps they could take, etc.

In the wilderness of the moon god Sin

The Hebrew refugee caravan was now in the “Wilderness of *Sin*” and in the vicinity of the cult-mountain *Horeb*, also known as *Sinai* (Ex 16:1). We are already familiar with *Sin* as the principal name of the moon deity.¹⁰ The cultic site *Sinai* derives from this revered name.

Repīdīm is in the immediate vicinity of the sacred mountain. There the Hebrews are set upon by an Arabian tribe (Ex 17:8–13). This shows that the sacred period of new year celebrations was over, for in the month of Ragab no wars were fought.¹¹ Much more likely, the battle took place during the last week of the second month of the summer half-year. As during the Egyptian plagues and the crossing of the sea, Moses holds up his hands. As long as they are outstretched, the Hebrews are victorious.

Uplifting the hands is a symbolic astral sign. This is clear through Moses’ utterance: “A hand is on the throne of Yahweh.”¹² That throne—*kes*, *kese*, or *kese’*—indicates the full moon (Ps 81:3; Prov 7:20). Here, too, the moon is conceived as the throne of god. We may compare other passages in which the moon is sometimes the tiara or the foundation of god.¹³ The hand on the throne of Yahweh is none other than the “hand of Yahweh” (Ex 9:3, Deut 2:15), now outstretched (Ex 3:20; 7:5; 9:15).

This hand of god is also Venus, even as Mercury is god’s arm and the sun is his eyes.¹⁴ [155] Venus, Mercury, and the sun do not appear as separate deities in the Mosaic tradition (God is one, Deut 6:4). Nevertheless, the planets were originally ‘parts’ of the divine entity, as we have seen.

⁹ Nielsen, Chp. 2:64.

¹⁰ Nielsen, Chp.1:15, 21, 34.

¹¹ Nielsen, Chp. 2:92.

¹² Erroneously translated in RSV, “A hand upon the banner of the LORD,” with the comment: “Meaning of Heb uncertain.”—RS

¹³ Nielsen, Chp. 3:109–10.

¹⁴ Nielsen, Chp. 4:129. The arm of god is also mentioned at Ex 6:6; 15:16; Ps 79:11; 89:14, 22; 98:1; Isa 40:10. For the eyes of god, cf. Deut 11:12; Ps 11:4; 33:18; 34:16; Amos 9:4, 8; I Kg 8:29.—RS

Where Venus or Mercury are thought of as god's son,¹⁵ the synodical alternation of the two inner planets has been so incorporated into the overall astral conception that god sends forth his son and then calls him back. When these planets distance themselves from the sun, god stretches out his hand and arm.

Venus, the evening star, was anciently conceived as the right hand of god, *yemīn*.¹⁶ This fits the Israelite emphasis on the unity of god, for Israelite religion repudiates both the concept of 'god's son' as well as any conception of multiple gods. In Jewish scripture the planets are not discrete gods but rather parts of god's single body. Thus, in the biblical account of the Exodus, Venus is not the 'son' of god, as in South Arabia, but merely his hand. Note in the Exodus account that it is precisely the right hand of god which is particularly potent:

Your right hand, O Yahweh, glorious in power—
Your right hand, O Yahweh, shattered the enemy...

You stretched out your right hand, the earth swallowed them.
(Ex 15:6, 12)

When the Israelites arrived at the sacred place of Sinai, the temple *Kāhin* (chief and priest)¹⁷ Jethro received them. [156] Jethro, who also venerated Yahweh, was the Midianite father-in-law of Moses. When he heard the wonderful means by which Yahweh had saved Israel, Jethro brought sacrifices before the god, along with Moses, Aaron, and the elders of Israel (Ex 18:5–12). It is clear from the ensuing account that the position of *Kāhin* was, among the Midianites, that of priest-chief, and that Moses was to take over that role among the Israelites.

"The next day Moses sat as judge for the people, while the people stood around him from morning until evening" (Ex 18:13). Jethro instructed him in the practicalities of judging (Ex 18:13–24). We are not, then, dealing with cultic matters, which were the purview of the Levites. Moses was to function as king, chief priest and chief justice, as the one who adjudicates the most important and difficult decisions. He did so by bringing them "before god," that is, before the oracle.

Moses interpreted the old arabian laws and hence is correctly designated a *Kāhin* in the bible. He was installed as such in the Sinai temple, as the Israelite chief. There he received from the chief *Kāhin* (Jethro) instruction regarding the discharge of his duties. This was not the case of administering an acknowledged body of law to a ready clan with an organized cult that was visiting a sacred precinct. Rather, Moses was dealing with a motley group and sought to transform them into a coherent entity with one religion and one body of laws.

¹⁵ Venus is god's son in all the South Arabian religions, namely those of Saba, Ma'in, and Qataban (brilliant son). Mercury is god's son in the religions of Qataban (hidden son), Harran, and Babylon (post-Hammurabi). See Nielsen, Chp. 1 *Appendix*.—RS

¹⁶ Mercury, of course, is rarely seen, and so most often we encounter Venus [in the graphic representations], namely, the 'hand' of god. Mesopotamian cylinder seals depict a hand with not five fingers but seven fingers representing the planets.

¹⁷ Nielsen Chp. 2:135.

Once the administrative foundation was laid with the help of Jethro, the religious task could be prosecuted. Steps for this were already prepared. [157] Moses was to function as the mouthpiece of Yahweh and tell the Hebrews:

“You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagle’s wings and brought you to myself. Now, therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine.” (Ex 19:4–5)

The future god of the Hebrews is a world ruler who, in particular, habituates the sacred precinct in Sinai and possesses eagle’s wings. We have already encountered a god with wings and specifically with those of the eagle: in the recovered monuments, the national deity of South Arabia, the moon god, is depicted as an eagle.¹⁸

According to Ex 19:1, the Israelites encamped in the vicinity of the sacred mount on the first day of the third month after the beginning of spring (the new year). We recall that, according to the old arabian lunar chronology, three days were added to each second month at new moon. Those three days, when the moon is invisible, were counted as part of an extended first week of ten days. Hence, the first light of the moon occurs on the evening of the third day.¹⁹

Those three days in which the moon god was absent were days of mourning, marked by various abstinences in preparation for the light of the new moon.²⁰ With this in mind we understand Yahweh’s words to Moses:

“Go to the people and consecrate them today and tomorrow. Have them wash their clothes and prepare for the third day, because on the third day Yahweh will come down upon Mount Sinai in the sight of all the people.”
(Ex 19:10–11)

The mountain is now sacred territory upon which no profane foot may tread. [158] The entire vicinity (the *himā*) was in any case holy, only to be approached after complete purification:²¹

“You shall set limits for the people all around, saying, ‘Be careful not to go up the mountain or to touch the edge of it. Any who touch the mountain shall be put to death.’”
(Ex 19:12)

¹⁸ “The moon’s orbits are spiral, its courses snakelike, and its motion the fastest among the heavenly bodies (see p. 62). Hence, the divine wings ascribed to the moon are those of the eagle.” (Nielsen Chp. 4:109.)

Though the *eagle’s* wings specifically refer to the moon, the winged disk was a generic sacred symbol for any astral deity: “The movement of god over the earth means that he must have wings. The depiction of a winged god—as also the conception that he travels in a circle and possesses circular or spherical shape—is not restricted to merely one god but is a property applicable to any and all astral deities” (Nielsen 4:107).

¹⁹ Nielsen 2:80–83.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 71–74.

²¹ *Ibid.* 98.

Thus, only after the prescribed cleansing, and when the signal from the sacred precinct was given, was it sanctioned to cross the threshold around the mountain—though it was still forbidden to go up the mountain and approach the god himself.

The tribe awaited the specified span of time in its tents and outside the sacred *Hima*, to then begin the arabian new moon celebration. But the above passage shows that the tribe in question was not one of the arabian tribes known to us, which made their customary annual pilgrimage to the sacred place and were already long familiar with the sacred rites and customs. The people of the biblical account were clearly foreigners who had never conducted an arabian pilgrimage (*Hajj*). The specified requirements are partly arabian custom, which apply generally to sacred rites in Arabia—for no Arabian enters a sacred area dressed in daily garb, nor in clothing which has been soiled by travel. If the circumstance or occasion requires no greater reverence, the Arabian will at least remove his shoes, a custom of which Moses must have become aware on his first temple visit.

Various abstinences were also customary at the Arabian *hajj* which served the purpose of purification, *iḥrām*. These included keeping away from womenfolk (cf. Sura 2:193) during the three days of the pre-Islamic new moon celebration.²² [159] Hence, Moses enjoins his people:

“Prepare for the third day; do not go near a woman.”

On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled. Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God. They took their stand at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because Yahweh had descended upon it in fire; the smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln,²³ while the whole mountain shook violently. (Ex 19:15–18).

We are dealing here with a much dramatized cultic event familiar in Arabia, but new to the Israelites upon whom it made a great impression. On the third day, at night, the moon’s light was to appear. It was the lunar day of rest and the day of assembly, *yom ha-qahal* (Deut 9:10; 10:4). Necessary work took place on the preceding two days, work associated with purification so that the people could rest on the third day and participate in the sacred celebration.

God’s appearance

Already on the morning of the third day, the mountaintop was alive with sounds of Levites managing the great fire and of cattle to be sacrificed. One saw ‘lightning’ from on high and smoke rising from the sacrificial pyre. Soon, a thick cloud overhung the

²² Nielsen 2:73–74. An ascetic strain generally characterized ancient smiths and metal workers, including the Kenites of Arabia who, as we have seen, were intimately associated with the story of Moses. M. Eliade writes: “It has been established that among miners, rites calling for a state of cleanliness, fasting, meditation, prayers and acts of worship were strictly observed.” (*The Forge and the Crucible*, Chicago: Univ. Press, 1978:56.) Mining in ancient times was holy, for the miner not only entered into the sacred earth, but he also functioned as a demigod, bringing forth (giving birth to) the mysterious metal out of which, furthermore, he mysteriously employed fire to ‘fashion’ (create) useful and necessary implements, as well as powerful weapons.—RS

²³ The wording once again evokes the Kenite metalworker’s craft.—RS

mountaintop: “and smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln.”²⁴ At the new moon celebration not only were calves sacrificed but also bulls which, on account of their horns, evoked the symbol of the impending new moon: ☾ . [160] One should not suppose that this was a small or inconsequential celebration—records show that one south arabian king sacrificed 40 bulls at once.

The Hebrews, lodged at the foot of the mountain, observed the novel rites with awe. They then heard an ear-splitting trumpet sound which, reaching their unaccustomed ears, set them in fear. It was the signal to approach sacred ground. One is reminded of the Christian custom of going to Church upon hearing the steeple bells. The Hebrews later employed trumpets, partly to announce the time of assembly and partly as part of the cultic rites themselves. The custom was of arabian origin, as we see from Yahweh’s directive in Midian to Moses:

Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying: “Make two silver trumpets; you shall make them of hammered work; and you shall use them for summoning the congregation, and for breaking camp... The sons of Aaron, the priests, shall blow the trumpets; this shall be a perpetual institution for you throughout your generations... Also on your days of rejoicing, at your appointed festivals, and at the beginnings of your months, you shall blow the trumpets over your burnt offerings and over your sacrifices of well-being; they shall serve as a reminder on your behalf before Yahweh your god. I am Yahweh your god.” (Num 10:1–2, 8, 10)

The signal for the Hebrews go up on the holy mountain is given “when the trumpet sounds a long blast” (Ex 19:13). The trumpet sounds unequivocally (“so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled,” v. 16), and Moses gathers them at the foot of the mountain, presumably towards evening.

[161] The first portion of the sacred observances consisted of trumpet music and an antiphonal exchange between Moses and the deity: “As the blast of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses would speak and God would answer him in thunder” (Ex 19:19). The content of Moses’ exchange with God must remain uncertain, until we gain a more precise understanding of the religious rites of ancient Arabia. In the autumn festival, the jubilation (*tahlil*) consists of repeated cries of *labbaika*, “[We stand as] Your servants.” The Hebrews later cried *amen* (“He [God] is true”) or *hallelu-yah*, “Praise Yah” [Yahweh]. Perhaps the future discovery of a north minaeans inscription will reveal the customary liturgical formula at such a midianite celebration.

An important element of later Hebrew rites was the priest loudly announcing the divine decrees from the sacred precinct. This can be traced back to Moses in Midian (Deut 31:1, 11; Josh 8:33–35). Today, the *Mu’eddhin* announces the most important points of the sacred laws from the minarets, using a loud yet melodious voice.

Similarly, the new moon festival was accompanied by the solemn announcing of the commandments. [162] This occurred at the very culmination of the celebration, namely, at the first light of the new moon when the deity presented himself in the heavens.

²⁴ Nielsen 3:103–04.

When Yahweh descended upon Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain,
Yahweh summoned Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went
up. (Ex 19:20)

The appearance of Yahweh is described by the Hebrew *yered*, “descended.” This *terminus technicus* shows that we are dealing with an astral appearance. It corresponds to the Minaean term *yarad*, referring to the appearance of the new moon on the western horizon shortly after the sun’s descent below that very same horizon.²⁵ “Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God. They took their stand at the foot of the mountain” (Ex 19:17). The people were on the eastern side of the mountain facing the holy mount and the western horizon beyond, from which the new moon was soon to rise. [163] Thus they faced Moses upon the mountain, who now spoke for the rising deity.

The theophany of the rising moon prior to the onset of darkness was the culmination of the festival and of the peoples’ devotion. The moment had come to intone the commandments of god from the mountain, and first Moses was himself called to the mount—only Moses, and no one else from the people save Aaron. This restriction, which underscores the sacrality of the mountain, is emphasized and re-emphasized in the strongest language (Ex 19:21–25).

At issue was the mysterious character of the astral worship in the divine precinct. In pre-Islamic religion of Arabia, the deity communicates to man through an oracle, often directly through the sacred rock or mountain from which a divine “voice” could be heard. Babylonian-Assyrian inscriptions reveal the presence of “a hidden place,” *ašar puzri*, a Holy of Holies, from which the priest spoke.²⁶ Similarly marvelous elements in the later Harranian mysteries, famous throughout the Levant, are recounted by Moslem authors.

The Hebrews “hear” the loud voice of Yahweh, though no form is perceived on the mountain (Deut 4:12; 5:22). [164] The divine voice revealed the ten commandments, now known to Jewish and Christian schoolchildren alike. But the Hebrews of the biblical account were not familiar with such a voice coming out of the rock and, as it were, direct from heaven. Nor were they familiar with the commandments. The people fled and stood at a distance (Ex 20:18). Moses then mediates between god and the people.

The *hajj* ended with growing darkness and pitch blackness (Ex 20:21; Deut 4:11)—the new moon had descended below the horizon. Then the people withdrew from the awesome sacred precinct and returned to their tents.

²⁵ Thus nature presents the dramatic superiority of the moon over the sun, in that the former supersedes the latter. The sun, so brilliant by day, repeatedly succumbs to the darkness of night. But the moon from an inauspicious glimmer quietly and steadily conquers that darkness, growing brighter night each night.—RS

²⁶ Cf. Nielsen Chp. 2:70. Compare the Greek mysteries, where the priestess was often hidden to the proselyte and mediated the voice of the divine.—RS

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