

# **The Natsarene and Hidden Gnosis**

**René Salm**

# Contents

1. Introduction
2. Noah, the first Natsarene?
3. David, Bethlehem, and the scribes
4. Ephrathath and crossing over
5. The demise of gnosticism
6. Priests vs. Levites

## Foreword

I wrote this 6-part essay in 2011, to be read in conjunction with Ditlef Nielsen's groundbreaking and long forgotten book *The Old Arabian Moon Religion and the Mosaic Tradition* (1904). The original essay is available complete in PDF form [here](#). The first five chapters of Nielsen's book (in my translation from the German) are available in a series of PDF's [here](#).

To get the most out of this essay, the reader is urged to also read Nielsen's writing, which explores a number of still novel themes that are foundational to the origins of Christianity—such as: the influence of North Arabian religion on early Israelite origins, and in turn on Christianity; the gnostic nature of the religion of Midian, where (according to the legend) Moses sojourned and learned from Jethro; and the gnostic character of the most ancient Israelite religion. These aspects of the pre-history of Christianity are usually shunned, for they lead in directions inimical to both normative Judaism and normative Christianity. Those directions can be generally labeled “pre-Christian gnosticism.”



Noah or Atrahasis ("Ultra-Wise"): the rarest of all individuals who is supported by the water of gnosis

The terms "Nazarene" and "Nazoraean"—both familiar from the Christian gospels—continue to present enigmas. In this essay I show that these terms reflect the Semitic n-ts-r (nun-tsade-resh), a root with specifically gnostic connotations going back as far as the Bronze Age. The glossaries tell us that Hebrew natsar means "watch, preserve, guard." Its cognates in related Semitic languages incorporate the meanings of "secret knowledge" and "hidden things." Each of these interpretations, in its own right, is a potent concept in the gnostic systems of many eras. Watch / preserve / guard / secret knowledge / hidden things / were all associated with the Semitic root *natsar* well before 2,000 BCE when the flood story was first formulated. In other words, "the Nazarene" did not first appear with Christianity. He demonstrably goes back to "the time of Noah."

The fact that Jesus is known as “the Nazarene” (*ho nazôraios, hê nazarêne*) links Christianity from its inception with the very ancient prehistory of this term and with the (generally unsuspected) gnostic thought of ancient man. It also shows us that Christianity departed from those ancient traditions and, indeed, has subsequently obliterated its own heritage. A correct understanding of Christianity must bring its ancient gnostic roots once again to light. That is the task of this essay, as well as of other writings on this website.

My 2008 book *The Myth of Nazareth: The Invented Town of Jesus* challenges the facile assumption that “Nazarene” in the New Testament means “from Nazareth.” It opens up another (and long repudiated) path revealing that “Natsarene” (or a close cognate, in which the “ts” transliterates the Semitic tsade) was widely used in Iron Age religion to designate the person of advanced spirituality—a spirituality linked to hidden gnosis. Hence the title of this essay: “The Natsarene and Hidden Gnosis.”

A discussion of hidden gnosis inevitably introduces unfamiliar symbols. We shall see that 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.”—  
R.S.

## Part 1

### ***The Natsarene and Hidden Gnosis***

In Mesopotamian cuneiform texts of the second millennium BCE—the oldest stratum of Semitic usage—*na-tsâ-ru* has a wide range of meanings. It includes: (1) be watchful, alert, on guard; (2) restrain, control; (3) keep secrets; and (4) preserve, keep, observe.<sup>1</sup> The root is n-ts-r, in Hebrew נצר (nun-tsade-resh). From this root we must also seek the derivation of the Greek *ναζαρηνοσ*, found in the New Testament (Gospel of Mark), and also of its cognates *ναζωραιοσ* (Gospel of Matthew), the intermediate form *ναζαπα* (“Q”), and finally the name of the village from which Jesus ostensibly hailed, *ναζαρεθ*. For a number of reasons (including the incompatibility of Greek zeta and Semitic *tsade*), it has generally been acknowledged that the Greek forms do not derive from the Semitic name of the village, נצרת (“Natsrath”).<sup>2</sup>

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

[T]hose amongst the community who possess secret knowledge are called Natsuraia–Nazoraean... At the same time the ignorant, or semi-ignorant laity are called ‘Mandaeans,’ Mandaiia–‘gnostics.’ (E. Drower, *The Secret Adam*. Oxford: 1960, p. IX.)

---

<sup>1</sup> In these posts, the “ts” represents the Semitic letter *tsade*, often transcribed as an “s” with underdot. Extensive information on Akkadian *na-tsâ-ru* is found in the Chicago Assyrian Dictionary (CAD) vol. 11, pp. 33 ff.

<sup>2</sup> 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 Gk. *ναζαρηνοσ* / *ναζωραιοσ* from Heb. e.g., Acts 24:5, where Paul is called “a ringleader of the sect of Nazoreans”—hardly נצרת, understandable if “Nazorean” means the inhabitant of an otherwise unknown 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*, American Atheist Pr., 2008).

Miss Drower writes elsewhere that the Natsaraia are those “skilled in esoteric knowledge.”<sup>3</sup> 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 is affirmed in Mesopotamian religion but suppressed in Jewish scripture.<sup>4</sup> 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”). These terms are ‘de-gnosticized’ by the Jewish scribes and made functions of Yahweh’s powers. Yahweh’s actions come ‘suddenly’ to those who do not ‘watch’ and are not prepared. Hence, his actions are sudden judgments and punishments upon the wicked. Yahweh appears unexpectedly (Mal 3:1) and metes out quick retribution upon his enemies (Isa 48:3; Pr 24:22). Similar *unexpected* 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).<sup>5</sup> In these passages, the focus is not

---

<sup>3</sup> Drower, E., and R. Macuch. *A Mandaic Dictionary*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1963, p. 285.

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

<sup>5</sup> 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).

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)

The key here is knowledge into the ways of the divine. By implication, ignorance is itself *evil* and demands destruction. Thus, a detectable gnostic substratum underlies Jewish scripture, one abandoned by the later Yahwists who effectively replaced gnosis with obedience to Yahweh. A vestige of the older religion survives in the tenet that the *wise* person knows the ways of Yahweh. Divine action does not catch him off guard. He avoids ruin because he is watchful, and his watchfulness lends him insight unseen by his peers—*gnosis*. This view survives in Christianity:

“Take heed, watch; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on watch. 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 and find you asleep. And what I say to you I say to all: Watch.” (Mk 13:33-37)

## Part 2

### **Noah, the first Natsarene?**

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 napolishtim*, "Preserver of Life," a phrase employing the root n-ts-r.<sup>6</sup> It should also not surprise us that *netsêru* in Akkadian means "secret knowledge," particularly that received from the moon god Ea/Enki (the god of the underworld ocean).<sup>7</sup> In the flood story, secret knowledge protects the wise person against that which destroys the entire world.

The Mandaeans identified Noah with the Good Shepherd, and the ark with the ship of light:

A shepherd am I, whose ship will soon arrive. I come with my light-ship containing my sheep and my lambs... Every male and female lamb which lets itself wander is pulled under by the maelstrom, is entangled by the [all-encompassing] water. Whoever does not hear my call, sinks.<sup>8</sup>

In the Akkadian flood story the ark came to rest on the very top of Mt. Nitsir—again 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

---

<sup>6</sup> Lambert and Millard, 126 line 8.

<sup>7</sup> CAD vol. 11.2: 276; C. Bezold, *Babylonisch-Assyrisches Glossar*, 1926:204. Also cf. Nielsen chp. 2, the section "N-ts-r and the lunar origins of the flood story," esp. nn. 31 & 32.

<sup>8</sup> M. Lidzbarski, *Das Johannesbuch der Mandäer*, 1915:48. Cf. Jn 10:1-18.

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.

[An aside: Later, this locus is transferred to Mt. Hermon, also 'half way between earth and heaven,' and the meeting place of the gods (cf. [Enoch 7:7](#)). Since Neolithic times, Mt. Hermon had been the sacred place past which the sun was seen to descend into the western sea. It was the 'gate' of day/night—the metaphorical gate of death, the home of the 'watcher' Lahmu gods (see below) and whence came sacred waters—of the Jordan river. All living beings, like the sun, had to pass through and under the mountain at the Western horizon. Incidentally, Mt. Hermon in the Galilee was also the scene of Jesus' transfiguration and of Peter's receiving the 'keys of the kingdom' (Mt 16:13 ff. & pars.). At the foot of that mountain lay the holy shrine to the god Dan (in Ugaritic *Danel*, "Judge of God" = Last Judgment). Even Gilgamesh went to "the white mountain of Lebanon" in search of secret knowledge, where 'lived' Utnapishtim—Noah.]

In the simplest terms, Noah has miraculously pierced through the barrier (the flood) ordinarily separating life and death.<sup>9</sup> He appears unscathed 'on the other side'<sup>10</sup> (i.e., 'after' the flood). Secret knowledge allows the Natsarene to be 'awake' when others are 'sleeping' (cf. Mk 13:35-37), 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.

---

<sup>9</sup> '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, [Paleolithic Religion](#), 2010:34-39). That wall endures in the Akkadian flood story, where the divine Ea speaks to Utnapishtim through a reed wall (tbl.XI:20 ff).

<sup>10</sup> See below for a discussion of this important phrase.



Noah's Ark. Italian mural painting, mid 16th century.

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, significantly, is punished for the attempt—he is 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.” That meeting originally took place (as it still does)<sup>11</sup> in the near death experience, often accompanied with loss of blood and hallucinations. The shaman evoked the psychic descent by going downwards into the earth. He 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 recesses inside the earth, long considered sacred, 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

---

<sup>11</sup> Salm, “Paleolithic Religion,” 22 ff; R. Moody, *Life after Life* (1975).

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. This irony is exquisitely preserved in the Gospel of Thomas, where we read: “That which you have will save you if you bring it forth from yourselves. That which you do not have within you will kill you, if you do not have it within you” (Logion 70). That is: gnosis saves if one has it, and gnosis kills if one does not have it.

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 Lahmu (m.) and Lahamu (f.). In Bronze Age iconography a Lahmu stands at each side of a gate, indicating that gnosis is an entryway to the divine. In this sense, wells and springs were entrances 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 temples. In them could be found a large tank of water, also called the *abzu* (no doubt symbolic of the underworld ocean of gnosis)—such as the “brazen sea” in Solomon’s temple (2 Chron 4:2), and the imposing pool of water in Ashur at the 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*.<sup>12</sup> Roberts further shows that the term is related to the adjective *hayy(um)*, “alive, living,”

---

<sup>12</sup> J. Roberts, *The Earliest Semitic Pantheon*, 1972:19–21 and p. 80, n. 117. Discussion is at S. Kramer, *Myths of Enki, the Crafty God*, 1989:244. 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).

with the specific meaning of spring-fed or running water.<sup>13</sup> 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 in the most sacred River Jordan—the river which flows from Mt. Hermon.

## **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<sup>14</sup> 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 Lahmus were divine helpers of Enki, the god of water and of wisdom (i.e., of ‘watery wisdom’). As mentioned above, a pair of Lahmus is often portrayed in Babylonian iconography standing one at each side of a sacred gate. I don’t wish to dwell too much on these divinities, but their intermediate status can be noted: the Lahmus stand between gnosis and mankind. In a sense, they prefigure later intermediate spiritual beings, i.e., ‘angels.’ We shall see that the Aramaic word for angel (*‘ir*) means “watcher,” and—most appositely—is etymologically related to *natsar*...

The Lahmus guarded and granted access to gnosis—an extremely ancient task—for gnosis (= divinity) was considered far too exalted for

---

<sup>13</sup> Confirmation of this is found in the later identification of Ea with *nagbu*, “source, spring, groundwater.” See Kramer, *op. cit.*, 145.

<sup>14</sup> *Ziusudra* is the Sumerian name of the flood hero. *Atrahasis* and *Utnapishtim* are Akkadian names, and *Noah* (“rest”) the Hebrew name.

casual or unworthy approach. When/if the Lahmus open the gate, a deluge ensues—the deluge of wisdom which destroys all those who are ignorant. Only the very wise could rise above that deluge, as did Atrahasis/Utnapishtim/Noah (i.e., the ‘enlightened’ person). In fact, the flood story is one of the first metaphors for the predicament of life—all mankind drowns except he who is ‘Ultra-wise.’

If he wishes to reach immortality and transcend his ignorance, man must metaphorically pass through the gate to gnosis, sometimes conceived as occurring at death. (I.e., gnostic baptism = spiritual ‘resurrection.’) Entering water was certainly a gnostic metaphor for enlightenment in very ancient pre-Christian times. The gate or ‘home’ at which that spiritual transition took place was known as Beit-Laḥmu, the “house of Lahmu,” that is, Bethlehem (House “of Lahmu,” not “of Bread,” *lehem*)<sup>15</sup> – 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.<sup>16</sup> 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, the Old Testament town is entirely unsubstantiated by the material finds. 2 Samuel mentions two gnostic symbols—a gate and a well—in connection with Bethlehem (see next paragraph). These have not been found in the archaeological record. 2 Chronicles 11:5-12 notes that Rehoboam made the “fortress” of Bethlehem “very strong,” but neither wall nor structures dating to

---

<sup>15</sup> “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).

<sup>16</sup> A. Oshri, “Where Was Jesus Born?” *Archaeology*, Nov-Dec. 2005:42-45.

biblical times have come to light.<sup>17</sup> 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.

“Bethlehem” was a purely mythical place. Indeed, we have seen that it was already the mythical gate to gnosis and the home of the Lahmu gods. 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 an all-important point: 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 and recurring teaching of Judaism.

---

<sup>17</sup> A summary of the material evidence is in K. Prag, “Bethlehem: A Site Assessment,” *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 132 (2000):169ff.

## Part 3

### ***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.

The Jewish scribes who penned the Torah call the person from Ephrath an “Ephratite.” To add to the confusion, however, at times they equate Ephrathite with Ephraimite—that is, with one from the hill country north of Jerusalem.<sup>18</sup>

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.

---

<sup>18</sup> Judg 12:5; 1 Sam 1:1; 1 Kg 11:26.



The Mesopotamian god Enki atop the mountain, with waters of gnosis flowing from his shoulders and sacred fish swimming against the stream of passions.

The Jewish scribes also desired that David come from 'Beit-Lahmu,' 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*—a name which, **as we have seen**, 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.<sup>19</sup> Secondly, we now have evidence that the Jerusalem scribes<sup>20</sup> appropriated the mythological Beit-Lahmu and transformed it into “Bethlehem of Judea.” The place was imaginary during their time,<sup>21</sup> 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.)

---

<sup>19</sup> Nielsen, chp. 4:129, 136.

<sup>20</sup> These scribes are known as the Aaronides and are associated with the “Priestly” source in the documentary hypothesis (see below).

<sup>21</sup> 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).



Ruth the Moabitess, by Arthur Hughes

Indeed, the origin was “old, from ancient days,” for the mythical Beit-Lahmu 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.

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. About 315 CE the Christian monarch authorized construction of a basilica over the very spot Jesus was allegedly born—a cave.<sup>22</sup>

This cave was not in a settlement but in a forest, as we know from reports of the church fathers.<sup>23</sup> 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

---

<sup>22</sup> 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).

<sup>23</sup> 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.

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."



*Adonis' Dream*, by Richard Franklin

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.

The name Adonis appears only in the West and is a graecism of *Adonai*, Hebrew for “My Lord.” Adonis is not uniquely a western divinity. He is merely the Levantine name for the Sumerian god Dumuzi, known in Hebrew as Tammuz. In Sumerian, *Dumu-zi* means “Son of Truth” or “True Son” (cf. “Son of God”). 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.<sup>24</sup> 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 are even mentioned by the prophet Ezekiel (8:14–15). They do this at the gate of Jerusalem, and it is impossible not to think of the women “looking on from afar” at Jesus’ crucifixion (Mk 15:40 & parallels).

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.<sup>25</sup> Transcending gender implies control of the passions—another theme much in evidence in gnostic Christian sources.<sup>26</sup> As son/daughter of the abzu, Dumuzi is the offspring of god

---

<sup>24</sup> In some accounts Dumuzi/Tammuz descends into the underworld for six months of the year and is ‘brought back to life’ by Inanna.

<sup>25</sup> See, e.g., *Gospel of Thomas* 22; Mt 5:27–28; 19:11–12; Lk 23:29; Rev 14:3–5, etc.

<sup>26</sup> See ‘encratite’ 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.

Ea/Enki. More particularly, s/he is the offspring of the god of underworld (unseen) gnosis.

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.<sup>27</sup>

There is a deeper reason why women metaphorically wept over the death of Adonis. There is an old tradition that this epitome of virility (an "Adonis" still carries this meaning) had transcended passion, that he had fled from the female, and that he had even emasculated himself. This is why the females weep: their "Adonis" is no longer available. As it happens, he had escaped into *gnosis*. Sublimation of the passions through *gnosis* is an integral aspect of subsequent Gnostic Christian "heresies." It also survives in the New Testament, as we read at Mt. 19:12: "There are those who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven."

Since Paleolithic times man has descended into caves to contact the transcendent, as we witness in the famous cave paintings of Lascaux

---

<sup>27</sup> H. Vincent and F. Abel, *Bethléem: Le Sanctuaire de la Nativité*, Paris: V. Lecoffre, 1914:12-13. Translation by RS. Vincent writes *l'éternel symbole solaire*, literally "eternal solar symbol," though "eternal son" (rather than "sun") would be just as apposite.

and other places in southern Europe.<sup>28</sup> In the Bronze Age, Enki/Ea was master of the abzu, the underworld ocean representing gnosis. Wells and springs were openings to that abzu from the world above. Similarly, caves were sacred openings to the underworld, as we see in the mystery religions of late antiquity.<sup>29</sup> It was there that hidden, secret wisdom was to be found, mediated by Sybils, chthonic deities, and by 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. It should not escape us that ‘the entrance leading to gnosis’ is precisely the significance of Beit-Lahmu, that is, ‘Bethlehem.’ We have seen in Part 2 of this series that the Lahmu gods ‘guarded’ (Heb. *natsar*) the gate leading to the beyond. In the Mesopotamian cosmology of the Bronze Age this gate was quintessentially in the West where the sun daily descended into its underworld grave—Mt. Hermon in the northern region near Dan and at the headwaters of the Jordan River. Any opening into the earth, however, was a ‘gate’ to the underworld, and hence sacred. In the Old Testament, wells are often the places of revelation, discovery, and communication with the divine. (Cf. Beersheba, Beer-Lahai-Roi, and the well at Aram Naharaim [Gen 24:10 f.] where Isaac’s servant found Rebecca.)

This view persists well into classical times. Consider, for example, the Mystery Religions, in which a sacred mediator sits in a cave (a place connecting with the underworld)—often directly over a crevasse—and there she delivers oracles, gnostic secrets from the realm below. In this

---

<sup>28</sup> Salm, “Paleolithic Religion,” and the writings of D. Lewis-Williams.

<sup>29</sup> See J. Ustinova, *Caves and the Ancient Greek Mind: Descending Underground in the Search for Ultimate Truth*, Oxford: University Press, 2009.

we see the long overlooked connection between gnosticism and the so-called Mystery Religions.



Mithras and the Unconquered Sun

A long-venerated cave leading downwards into the earth was chosen by Christianity as the birthplace of its savior. 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.<sup>30</sup>

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-Lahmu. 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.

---

<sup>30</sup> For several days before and after Dec. 21 the sun’s weak force appears unchanged. It is four days after the theoretical winter solstice that the sun first appears to ‘strengthen.’

## Part 4

### ***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-Lahmu (Bethlehem) was the home of the Lahmu 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 sought out by David himself, **as already cited** (2 Sam 23:13-17).

The etymology of Ephrath (אפרת) is of some significance. Its root a/e-p-r (אפר) corresponds to the Babylonian-Assyrian *ebêru* (אבר) with the common exchange of labials beth and pe. *Ebêru* means “reach the other side, go across, through, or over.”<sup>31</sup> 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).<sup>32</sup> The Mesopotamian e-b-r and Hebrew ‘-b-r correspond in meaning and have yielded e-p-r (→ Ephrath).

---

<sup>31</sup> C. Bezold, *Babylonisch-Assyrisches Glossar*. Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1926, p 13; CAD vol. 20:10 ff., “ebêru”; cf. Drower and Macuch, *A Mandaic Dictionary* (Oxford, 1963) p. 4, “ABR I, “to get over, pass over, get through.”

<sup>32</sup> BDB 716 ff.

The nominal form of Hebrew *eber* (ayin-beth-resh) signifies 'the other side,'<sup>33</sup> 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.



Rachel's tomb near Bethlehem

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:

---

<sup>33</sup> BDB 719, no. 5676.

[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, than that all his children be in the land of immortality.

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.<sup>34</sup> 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.<sup>35</sup> This is further attestation that, in the earliest stage of its formation—a stage which took place in the gnostic-imbued region of Midian<sup>36</sup>—the Hebrews referred to themselves as those who ‘crossed over.’

We can now add a fourth clue to the above. In Jewish scripture, the body of water through which the Exodus occurs is *Yam Suf* (ים סוף),

---

<sup>34</sup> BDB 717.

<sup>35</sup> BDB 720, no. 5680.

<sup>36</sup> Nielsen chp. 4.

usually translated “Red Sea.” However, the phrase literally means “Sea of Reeds,” tentatively identified with a much smaller inlet of water nearer to Mediterranean coast, in the land of Goshen and east of the Nile delta. *Suf* commonly means “to come to an end, cease” (BDB 5486). According to this interpretation, Yam Suf signifies “The Sea of the Ending.”<sup>37</sup> The meaning can only be gnostic—it is the barrier between this world and the transcendent world. In other words, the early Israelites crossed the figurative border marking the cessation of ignorance and the entrance into enlightenment, ‘the land of salvation’ –Ephrath, the original ‘promised land.’<sup>38</sup> *The early Israelites of the time of Moses were gnostic.*



Crossing the Jordan

After the Exodus, the gnostic meaning was lost. ‘Crossing’ was associated with the River Jordan and ‘crossing over’ with attaining the promised land. Henceforth gnosis is forgotten and even repudiated. The Israelites are now God’s ‘chosen people,’ and the land west of the Jordan is their chosen ‘holy land.’ Crossing the Jordan becomes central to the new religion. The Jordan is crossed literally in Jewish scriptures, sometimes literally and figuratively in the Pseudepigrapha,

<sup>37</sup> N. Lemche, *Prelude to Israel's Past*. Peabody: Hendrickson 1998:54-55.

<sup>38</sup> In Mandaean scripture *Sufath* is the land beyond, located in the underworld of darkness. See M. Lidzbarski:24 n.2.

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.

In the older religion, the gnostic is the one who crosses the flood, the Sea of Reeds, and the river of gnosis with impunity. He is the 'Natsarene' (the one who "watches" and "preserves secrets"). When we consider that water was a symbol of gnosis as far back as Neolithic times,<sup>39</sup> then 'passing across (or through) the waters' becomes a metaphor for attaining enlightenment. Dipping into water is dipping into wisdom. This is the origin of the rite of baptism.

**Crossing a body of water** (the Exodus) 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 in the story of the flood: 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/Jesus—understands the secret ways of the divine and crosses the barrier unscathed.

---

<sup>39</sup> 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.



The Jordan River today

## Part 5

### ***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 Aaronide priests of Jerusalem jettisoned the old goal of 'acquisition of gnosis' (which was still practiced at Dan in the north) and fashioned 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 forbade even the presumption of this possibility. The strict separation between man and God is an essential requirement in Judaism. This is also why the religion is inveterately anti-gnostic. In gnosticism, after all, man becomes divine. In Judaism, this concept is the epitome of horror.



"Destruction of Leviathan" by Gustave Doré

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). How often the gnostic light bringer (*Lucifer*) of one era becomes the devil of the next era! 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 thus replaced understanding of life. I suggest that this predictably occurs when a religion reaches a certain level of organization, at which stage a powerful priesthood inevitably finds obedience necessary and forbids independent searching, which it considers 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 Utnapishtim reside far away, at the mouth of the rivers" (Gilg. XI:192 f).<sup>40</sup> The place where Utnapishtim resides is Mt. Hermon in the Lebanon, to which Gilgamesh travels, and the rivers which issue from that mountain are the Jordan to the south and the Adonis (**Nahr Ibrahim**) to the west. 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 a 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 eats of the fruit. However, he does not die but in fact gains precious knowledge. Adam (Heb.

---

<sup>40</sup> 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).

“man”) does not succumb to intimidation but essentially gives the lie to Yahweh. “See,” Yahweh remonstrates, “the man has become like one of us,<sup>41</sup> 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). Henceforth a chasm exists between man and god. The basic message of Yahweh is “Do not approach!”—in diametric contrast to the gnostic message. In addition, Yahweh lays a number of frightful punishments upon man for his insufferable disobedience (3:16–19). These few verses establish the basic foundation of the Jewish faith and reveal it to be a religion of intimidation and limited spiritual possibilities.

### **Bethlehem, Dan, and the Levites**

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

---

<sup>41</sup> The plural “us” shows that Yahweh was still but one among many divinities.



The Mt. Hermon massif north of Dan producing the sacred waters of several rivers.

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 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 stolen and 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." This reveals a pre-existing relationship between the Danites and the Levite, one formed when the latter had lived in his hometown of Bethlehem. This further links the Danites with this particular Levite, and both with Bethlehem of Judah.



Sacred cave of Bethlehem, once a shrine to Adonis and then birthplace of Jesus.

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 attack 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."<sup>42</sup>

The entire story in Judges 17-18 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.

---

<sup>42</sup> Galilee extended east of the Jordan, as we see from the description of Josephus (Wars 3.3.1).



Ruins at the birthplace of Adonis (Tammuz/Dumu-zi, "True Son"), son of the water god Enki, at Afqa near Mt. Hermon. When the Christians arrived here in the fourth century, they destroyed the temple so that no two stones were left standing on top of one another.

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. This was where the **Lahmu deities had their home**. Here, metaphorically speaking, was the first "Bethlehem" ("House" of the god "Lahmu," not "House of Bread").

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 *Kâhin* (priest) Jethro in Midian.<sup>43</sup>

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."<sup>44</sup> By Aaronides is meant the aloof, self-serving, 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."<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> **Nielsen** Chp. 2:139-142.

<sup>44</sup> IDB, Suppl. volume, "Aaron, Aaronides."

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

## Part 6

### ***Priests vs. Levites***

We concluded the last section with an observation of Ellis Rivkin: “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 (gnostic) 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 rights to administer the Temple. Essentially, they arrogated to themselves the religion which became known as “Judaism.” With the rise of the Aaronides and the eclipse of the Levites, the old religion of Yahweh-*gnosis* became a religion of Yahweh *worship*. We recall that the First Temple of Solomon possessed an *abzu*—it was clearly a temple devoted to gnosis. But the Second Temple was emphatically devoted to the *worship* of Yahweh. In any case, archaeology has failed to find evidence of Solomon’s temple at all, showing that the language of Jewish scripture is largely metaphorical. David and Solomon themselves appear to have been mythical figures.



The brazen sea in the mythical Temple of Solomon

This accounting of history will no doubt be unfamiliar to the reader, even strange. After all, we read in the Jewish scriptures how the Levites are consistently subordinated to the "priests" (Num 3:6; 8:19; 18:2), how they cannot carry out the most important duties of the Temple, how they are landless, and how their tithes (i.e., their very livelihood) are but a fraction of the tithes first given the priests (Num 18:24, 30). This change in Levitical fortunes reflects a remarkable about-face which occurred at an early stage in Judaism. However,

unmistakable signs of the older religion survive in Jewish scripture, i.e., the Brazen Sea—a huge cauldron of water symbolizing gnosis (the Mesopotamian abzu) described in the Temple of Solomon (1 Kgs 7:23 f). This doubtless reflects the original pre-Aaronide religion of Israel—the religion of the Levites, “first born” to Yahweh (Num 3:12-13).

A [prior post in this series](#) describes how a Levite from Bethlehem goes northwards to Dan with accursed silver. This 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 already long been in the land carrying out priestly functions. But they could, and did, write a ‘new rule’ severely subordinating the Levites and excluding them from henceforth 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 a highly centralized priestly caste—the Aaronides—probably at first no more than a family. It would appear that the Aaronides conceived of their hegemony over the Israelite religion while in captivity in Babylon. It would have been there and then that they formulated the new recension of the Torah. The return to Jerusalem in the late sixth century was a religious re-conquest attended not only by the building of a new temple but also by new scriptures. Henceforth, the non-Jerusalem Levites were essentially outsiders to power. They constituted a vestige of the original Hebrew religion, of the religion of Moses, of North Arabia—and of Dan. (For more on these aspects see the tab above, “B.C.E. times”).

In post-exilic times the Levites carried on the torch of proto-gnosticism in more or less heterodox and ‘hidden’ traditions, represented by a number of writings in the Jewish pseudepigrapha (particularly the

Enoch literature). That literature powerfully informed Christianity, including its anti-Jerusalem and anti-cultic aspects (cf. Mk 11:15-19; 7:6, 15, etc).

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 the virulent Aaronide animosity directed at the older religion. 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 fashions his story (Num 16) in such a way that a divine sign determines who will be allowed to approach Yahweh—i.e., who will control the Temple and take pre-eminence in Israel.



The divine sign is not long in coming. The ground opens up and swallows 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" (Num 16:32-33). 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, 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 became outsiders. Henceforth, the priestly family of Jerusalem Aaronides wielded unchallenged authority within the clan of Levi and over the Temple (Num 17:1-13). Until the rise of the Pharisees, they guided Israelite religion.

## **Nazarene**

In the earliest Christian gospel that received canonical status, the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is known as a *Nazarenos*. Subsequently, however, “Jesus the Nazarene” was replaced by “Jesus of Nazareth” and, thus, the term “Nazarene” became an enigmatic term. To recover its meaning is to recover the true origins of Christianity.

Subsequent gospels replace “Nazarene” with “Nazareth”—a place, a toponym, a village not yet even in existence when the Gospel of Mark was written. It is clear that Mark knew the original meaning *Nazarene* (“keeper of hidden wisdom”), whom he calls “the Holy One of God.” (1:24)—but Mark betrays the inner spiritual meaning by making his Jesus a miracle worker who heals the body and commands the physical elements by the magic power of God and by faith (1:25; 5:36, etc). Subsequent Christian writings took the Marcan solution several steps further by giving Jesus a physical origin (virgin birth) and bodily resurrection. For Mark, faith in this bodily Jesus has replaced gnosis—knowledge of life (in Mandeian, *Manda d’Hayye*).

In view of the above, to understand Christian origins we must return to the original word “Nazarene” and inquire into its meaning. Behind the Greek word doubtless lies the Semitic root n-ts-r, discussed in [a prior post](#). That very ancient root—going back even to the third millennium BCE—betrays several meanings, including the possession of secret wisdom, and the ability to ‘cross over’ from ignorance to gnosis. That crossing over is preserved in monumental literary stories including the Flood, the crossing of the Red Sea, and the crossing of the Jordan

River to the Promised Land. Underneath all these iconic stories is a deeper gnostic message—crossing over from ignorance to gnosis. However, in each case that original message has been lost as the story became concretized: today we read about crossing various bodies of water, having quite forgotten that “water” was long ago a symbol of gnosis. The metaphor became fact, the symbol became real—and, in the process, the truth became lost.

### **Water and watchfulness**

In ancient gnostic religion man crosses the sea of gnosis, as does Atrahasis/Noah. In the subsequent anti-gnostic Jewish religion, however, the Aaronides metaphorically asserted dominion over gnosis by taking the waters literally and making them “roll” back. We see this regression of the waters in the crossings by the Israelites of both the Nile and of the Jordan. In this way the Aaronides attempted to assert Yahweh’s victory over the religion of gnosis by merely asserting his victory over the physical realm.



Mandeans in the lower Tigris, Irak

For the gnostic, water was a positive symbol symbolizing not only gnosis but also those spiritual elements leading to gnosis. Such elements include watchfulness (*natsar*), that is, the difficult task of being awake while others are asleep. This is another way of metaphorically “going against the stream”—as did the fishes in so many Babylonian depictions of the god Enki.

The New Testament also contains sayings and parables that emphasize watchfulness. The name “Gregory” (from the Greek *gregorein*, “to watch”) is a relic referring to this older gnostic meaning. The divine will appears suddenly, at the most unlikely and inconvenient times (midnight, when you least expect it, etc.). God chooses to appear when men are asleep, and he rewards those that are ‘awake’ (Mt 25:1 ff). Being metaphorically awake or asleep at the moment of divine intervention is, in fact, the “judgment.”

The Gospel of Mark particularly enjoins ‘watchfulness,’ as we read in the famous scene in the Garden of Gethsemane (14:32 ff). Jesus exhorts the disciples to “remain here, and watch” (γρηγορεῖτε) while he prays. The disciples are unable to do so and fall “asleep.” Mark 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 **ἐξαιφνης** and find you asleep” (Mk 13:35-36).

It is no coincidence that the Matthean evangelist illustrates the suddenness of the Lord’s coming 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, *natsar*.

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.)

The key is *knowledge* into the ways of the divine—gnosis. By being watchful, the wise person avoids ruin; the action of the divine does not

catch him off guard. However, the ultimate value of watchfulness is not mere self-preservation. That too, is a metaphor. Being watchful, the wise person has saving insight unknown and unseen by his peers. He has conquered death. The deluge of ignorance drowns all except the Natsarene.

Noah was prepared through foreknowledge—in scripture, he was warned by an angel of the Lord. The New Testament relates that one is to metaphorically prepare for the divine visitation *precisely where and when one least expects*. Thus one can never be surprised. The parable of the wise maidens watching at midnight turns on such esoteric concepts (Mt 25:1 ff). In short, watchfulness is the key to understanding that which is hidden. The one who watches is the Natsarene ( < n-ts-r, "watch, keep, preserve"). 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 also a sacred symbol of gnosis, and the baptist sects of late antiquity can all, by definition, be denominated "gnostic." They frequently immersed in water to memorialize and re-enact their central sacrament, the attainment of gnosis ('enlightenment').

The Mandeans venerate John the Baptizer, a gnostic figure who dipped others in water—that is, he metaphorically introduced them to the way of gnosis. Using metaphors we have touched on in this series of posts, John's teaching came from gnosis (water), out of *Bethlehem* (the gate to gnosis), and 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 (according to the *Babyloniaca* of Berossus, the Mesopotamian priest of the third century BCE). These allusions are unfamiliar to Christians today. They inhabit the realm of gnosticism, a metaphorical realm replete with esoteric symbolism and

'contrary meanings,' using a language that amounts to a code accessible only to initiates. This language is clearly visible in gnostic tractates such as those discovered at Nag Hammadi. It is also evident in the New Testament itself (as in the parable of the ten maidens) where the gnostic message has been intentionally obscured—but not eradicated.

John preached a hopeful and revolutionary message: that salvation (*Yeshua*, "Jesus") is now and always at hand, readily available to every person through watchfulness and through the seeking of inner gnosis. This is the hidden knowledge, the *nitsirtu* of Mesopotamian religion two millennia earlier.

It is interesting that in the thoroughly suppressed Acts of Mark (still unpublished, but now available in part [on this site](#)), we read that Mark is a Levite and a disciple of John the Baptist. This and other clues reveal that the gnostic Levite, John the Forerunner, was the quintessential Natsarene. Though later obscured by the Church's Jesus of Nazareth, John "the Baptist" is a gnostic herald at the very foundation of the Christian religion.



The Preaching of John the Baptist by Baciccio