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**Leiden**

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1970
THE OMPHALOS MYTH AND HEBREW RELIGION

BY

SAMUEL TERRIEN

New York

It has long been recognized that the omphalos myth played an important part in the cults of ancient Greece. The pioneering work of Jane Harrison, at the end of the XIXth century 1), was followed by numerous monographs, especially those of W. H. Rösch, R. Meringer, A. B. Cook, E. Rohde, Ch. Picard, F. Robert, Marie Delcourt, and H. -V. Herrmann 2). Studies of the Greek forms of the myth have alerted the attention of Orientalists, like A. J. Wensinck and E. Burrows 3), to the importance of this belief for the understanding of Semitic as well as Hellenic religions. Historians of comparative religions and cultures, like G. Dumézil, Mircea Eliade


and W. Müller 1), have described manifestations of similar beliefs that are widespread among numerous ethnic groups. At the same time, biblical scholars have pointed out that the Canaanite myth of the earth-navel appears also in the literature of the ancient Hebrews. W. Caspari and H. W. Hertzberg, for example, have discussed the possibility that Mount Tabor was considered at one time to be the center of the land, and perhaps of the earth 2), but W. F. Albright has shown that the relation between the name „Tabor“ and the word tabhût is unlikely 3). On the contrary, W. Harrelson, B. W. Anderson, G. E. Wright, and E. Nielsen, among others 4), have reminded us, on the basis of Judg. ix 37, of the significance of the myth in the XIth cent. B. C. for the inhabitants of Shechem. Brevard Childs has analyzed the growth of the same mythical motif in connection with the temple of Solomon and the later speculations on the new Jerusalem 5). In spite of these scholarly monographs, the umphalos myth still receives on the part of contemporary historians of Hebrew


3) The word „Tabor“ possibly represents a Canaanite root, thur, „brightness, purity“; W. F. Albright, Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan, Garden City, N.Y., 1968, p. 111, note 4; yet cf. D. Winton Thomas, „Mount Tabor: the Meaning of the Name“, VT. I, 1951, pp. 229 ff., who suggests the root nbr (2 Sam. xxii 27), which may be related to the Ethiopic bëherti and the Amharic enbert, „navel“.

4) W. Harrelson, The City of Shechem: Its History and Importance (dissertation), New York 1953, p. 208 ff.; E. Nielsen, Shechem, Copenhagen 1955, p. 167; W. Harrelson, B. Anderson, and G. E. Wright, „Shechem, ‘Navel of the Land’“, B.A. XX, 1957, p. 2. However, the expression may refer to „the navel of the earth” or to „the center of the land”. Cf. G. F. Moore, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Judges, 2nd ed., Edinburgh 1908, pp. 260, 262; J.-M. Lagrange, Le livre des Juges, Paris 1903, pp. 175 f.; C. F. Burney, The Book of Judges, London 1918, p. 283; H. W. Hertzberg, Die Bücher Jona, Richter, Ruth, Göttingen 1953, p. 206; E. Taubler, Biblische Studien: die Epoche der Richter, Tübingen 1958, p. 153, note 1; J. Gray, Josua, Judges and Ruth, London 1967, p. 324; it is not likely that the rendering should be „the center of the land” in the sense of the meeting place of the north-south and east-west roads (Gray) since such a spot would have to be in the valley. More probably, the term alludes to the cosmic significance which was attached to a mountain, possibly Mt. Gerizim (Hertzberg).

religion no mention whatever or at best only scant attention \(^1\).

In all probability, the myth of the navel of the earth, far from being an incidental aspect of worship at the temple of Jerusalem, constitutes in effect the determining factor which links together a number of its cultic practices and beliefs that otherwise appear to be unrelated.

Following the work of W. H. Roscher, A. J. Wensinck, H. Gressmann, K. L. Schmidt, A. Lauha, O. Eissfeldt, and others \(^2\), Brevard Childs has shown that, according to the biblical traditions, the sacred space of the Jerusalem temple is set apart from all other spaces of the earth, not only because Yahweh has chosen Zion as his menubab, his “resting place” \(^3\), but also because the Judahites have adopted from the Canaanites of ancient Jebus the belief that the site of Zion was related to the navel of the earth. Solomon’s temple is built on a rock \(^4\) which is the earth-center, the world mountain, the foundation stone of creation, the extremity of the umbilical cord which provides a link between heaven, earth, and the underworld \(^5\).

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\(^5\) Since beliefs in the cosmic navel not only point to the spatial relationship of heaven, earth and abyss, but also use the biological function of the umbilical
It therefore becomes associated with the cosmic tree, \(^1\) the garden
cord as a mythopoetic expression, both temporal and spatial, of the spot where
the foundation of the earth began (cf. HARRISON, ROSCHER, WENSINCK, \textit{et al}.), it
is significant to observe that the verb 
\textit{qanah} means 
\textit{to own"}, 
\textit{to possess"}, as
well as 
\textit{to create"} in the sense of 
\textit{procreate"}, especially in the expression 
\textit{qanah thamayim wa'aret}, 
\textit{maker of heaven and earth"} (Gen. xiv 19, \textit{et al}.; cf. P. HUMBERT,
\textit{"Qanah en hébreu biblique"}, \textit{Festschrift für A. Bertholet}, 1950, p. 259 ff. ; reprinted
in \textit{Opuscules d’un hébraïsant}, Neuchâtel 1958, pp. 166 ff.; see especially pp. 173 ff.).
The presence of such an expression in a tradition which has been associated to
Jerusalem is probably more than coincidental if the omphalos myth existed in
Canaanite Jebus long before the Davidic conquest. As it is well known, the
Jewish priesthood inherited traditions and practices from the pre-Davidic shrine. See H. S. NŸBERG, 
p. 174 ff. ; H. SCHMIDT, "Jahwe und die Kulttraditionen von Jerusalem", \textit{ZAW.}
Cardiff 1955, pp. 42 ff.
The omphalos myth appears in the background of "the Chedorlaomer texts"
where "Babylon, the bond of heaven [and earth], which is founded toward
the four winds", receives its punishment from Marduk; M. C. ASTOUR, "Political
and Cosmic Symbolism in Genesis 14 and its Babylonian Sources", A. ALTMANN,
xiv is late (sixth cent. B.C.), the poetic blessing of Melchisedek (Gen. xiv 18-20)
may rest on an ancient oral tradition. Cf. S. LANDERSDORFER, "Das Priesterkönig-
tum von Salem", \textit{JSOR.} IX, 1925, pp. 203-16; W. F. ALBRIGHT, "The Historical
\textit{Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan}, Garden City, N.Y., 1968, p. 51 ff.; J. H. KROEZA,
\textit{Genesis Viertien}, Hilversum 1937, pp. 133 ff.; R. RENDTORFF, "El Ba’al und
In its aspect of umbilical cord between "heaven and earth", the omphalos
myth may also explain the use of these words as divine epithets in a seventh-
century B.C. Aramaic papyrus (A. DUPONT-SOMMER, "Un papyrus araméen
d’époque salée...", \textit{Semitica} I, 1948, pp. 44, 47; H. L. Ginsberg, "An Aramaic
Contemporary of the Lachish Letters", \textit{BAJOR} III, Oct. 1948, p. 24 ff. and
several Akkadian documents (K. Tallquist, \textit{Akkadische Götterpflüte}, Helsinki
1938, pp. 54, 64, 69, 71, 366; cf. F. M. CROSS, JR., "Yahweh and the God of the
Patriarchs", \textit{HTTR.} LV, 1962, pp. 241, 243 ff.).
The late tradition and the modern conjecture which relate Salem not to Jebus
but to Shechem (R. H. SMITH, "Abram and Melchizedek", \textit{ZAW.} LXXVII,
1965, pp. 129 ff., especially pp. 149 ff.) is significant, since both sites are related
to the omphalos myth.
\(^1\) A. JEREMIAS, "Die Bäume im biblischen Paradies", \textit{Das Alte Testament im
Lichte des Alten Orients}, 1906; 4th ed., Leipzig 1939, pp. 86 ff.; A. J. WENSINCK,
\textit{Tree and Bird as Cosmological Symbols in Western Asia}, Amsterdam 1921, pp. 25 ff.;
Ch. PICARD, \textit{Éphèse et Claros}, Paris 1922, pp. 499 ff.; A. BROCK-UHNE, \textit{Der
Gottesgarten: Eine vergleichende religionsgeschichtliche Studie}, Oslo 1936, pp. 36 ff.;
REINER, \textit{Der Baum des Lebens: eine Ausdeutung von Gen. 2, 3-3,} 24, Berlin 1937;
H. G. MAY, "The Sacred Tree on Palestine Painted Pottery", \textit{JACO}. LIX, 1939,
pp. 251-59; M. ELIAD, \textit{Le Chamanisme et les techniques archaïques de l'extase}, Paris
of Eden 1), and, at a later time, with the new Paradise, the heavenly Jerusalem 2). These beliefs do not receive an explicit formulation in the early traditions concerning the building of the temple 3), but the allusions found in the pre-exilic psalms and prophets, Ezekiel, and his post-exilic successors 4) clearly indicate that the acceptance of the omphalos myth, in a modified form, antedates by centuries the


5) 1 Kgs. vii 2-10, 14-36. While the interpretation of the words hâllôn ithâphîlm 'estânîm (vs. 4), yapûas and 'elîsadîth (vs. 5) is uncertain, they probably indicate, together with the carved decoration (vs. 18; cf. 2 Chr. iii 5; 1 Kgs. vii 15 ff.), that Solomon's temple was intended to include rituals of a sexual character. Even if the etymological connection between yapûas, "gallery" and yapûas, "couch, bed", is open to debate, the semantic association between the two words could hardly escape the attention of the popular mind (Gen. xlix 4; Job v 1; etc.). Cf. J. A. Montgomery, The Books of Kings, New York 1951, pp. 148 ff.; Möhler, op. cit., pp. 141 ff.; G. E. Wright, Biblical Archaeology, Philadelphia 1957), pp. 140 ff.; J. G. Gray, I & II Kings, Philadelphia 1963, pp. 154 ff.; M. Noth, Könige, I, Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1964, pp. 111 ff.

testimony of the Chronicler 1), the post-canonical Jewish literature 2), the New Testament 3) and Christian folklore 4).

I

In addition to the motifs which have been hitherto pointed out, one may add a number of features which are found at Jerusalem as well as in Delphi 5) and at other shrines claiming an earth-navel situation: snake-worship, chthonian rites, the solar cult, male prostitution and bisexuality.

1. In the first place, although we have no explicit information to the effect that the Bronze Serpent, Nehushtan, which Hezekiah destroyed (II Kings xviii 4), was already in Jerusalem when David's men captured the Canaanite stronghold, we have the right to assume, after the argumentation of H. H. Rowley, that this cultic object belonged to the Jebusite shrine in pre-Davidic times 6), that the Jebusite priest, Zadok, was in some way related to an ophidian ritual 7), and

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1) 1 Chr. xxii 18; 2 Chr. vii 1 ff.; cf. 2 Chr. iii 1 and Gen xxii 2, 14.
7) The arguments in favor of Zadok's relationship to the sanctuary of Gibeon are not decisive, although Jebus and Gibeon may well have shared cultic per-
that such a ritual, in turn, points to the worship of the telluric aspect of the *Magna Mater*. Representations of serpents appear together with those of the goddess Ashera at Ugarit, at Bethshan, possibly at Beit Mirsim, at Hazor, and at many other places of Syria and Palestine. The *seraphim* of Isaiah’s inaugural vision in the Jerusalem temple were probably “winged serpents,” which may reflect Egyptian rather than Canaanite mythology, as Karen Joines has recently suggested. Even if this is the case, however, the Egyptian cobra or uraeus is related to the underworld, and when it is endowed with hands, or feet as the Isianic *seraph* appears to be (vi 6), it also bears a human face with feminine features which point to its connection not with a god but with a goddess.

The representations of the omphalos at Delphi and elsewhere, which appear to have been associated from the earliest times with Gaea, the *Magna Mater* in her chthonian aspect, always include images


3) Is. vi. 2; cf. xiv 29; xxx 6; Deut. viii. 15.


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or symbols of the serpent 1). The Earth Goddess of the Eastern Mediterranean cultures is a Snake Deity, from the early Creto-Minoan times, down to the Ophite sects in pre-Christian and Christian gnosticism 2). It is therefore likely that the presence of Nehushatan in the Jerusalem temple indicates that the omphalos myth was alive among the Jebusites before the Davidic and Solomonic era.

2. In the second place, the meaning of the word *dehir*, used in the early sources of Kings to designate the innermost room of Solomon’s temple (1 Kgs. vi 5), probably derives from an Egyptian word for “back room,” which is also found in Arabic, rather than from the West-Semitic root *dbh.*, “to speak, to act,” a traditional derivation from which arose the rendering „oracle“ 3). Hence, it is not possible to affirm that the most sacred spot in Solomon’s temple was specifically designed for chthonian divination. Nevertheless, if one admits with H. Schmidt and R. de Vaux 4) that this innermost room, rather than the outside altar, rested on the original sacred rock, we are able to discern how this dark place could be directly related to the belief of „the foundation stone,” which already in the time of Isaiah connoted the idea of the underworld 5), and indeed came to symbolize the

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8) Isr. xxviii 16; cf. vss. 15 and 18; cf. also xxix 1-4 in which the city is called “Ariel”. This name is derived probably from a West-Semitic word related to the Akkadian *Aralla* or *Araha*, connecting the mountain of the gods and the underworld: W. F. Albright, Archaeology and the Religion of Israel, pp. 151-2; N.
lid which covers the mythical access to the subterranean abyss 1). The Sea of Bronze, outside the edifice, was considerable in its size and weight, as well as extremely complex and expensive in its manufacturing and installation 2). We have therefore the right to assume that Solomon shared with his Canaanite architects and technicians a belief in the urgency of its cultic function. The cosmic significance of the Sea of Bronze and especially its mythical association with the tehom are now generally recognized 3). Similar considerations apply probably to the great altar 4).

Now, one of the chief characteristics of the omphalos myth is precisely that it points not only to the sacred space which unites earth to heaven, but also and especially that it recalls hierarchically the


1) R. Patai, op. cit., p. 57 ff.


4) The *kɔ̀dhr*, "platform" (2 Chr. vi 12 ff.) on which the officiating priest or king stood in front of the altar may have been associated with the Sumerian ki-ur, "foundation of the earth" (W. F. Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel*, p. 150 ff.). Cf. "the bosom of the earth" (Ezek. xliii 13-17; W. F. Albright, "The Babylonian Temple-Tower and the Altar of Burnt-Offering", *JBL*. XXXIX, 1920, pp. 137 ff. A rabbinc tradition links the altar to the Tehom (Sukka 49, 53a; cf. A. J. Wensinck, *The Novel of the Earth*, pp. 25 ff.)
proximity of the primeval rivers. Without referring to the belief in the navel of the earth, W. F. Albright has shown years ago the several affinities which relate the mythical picture of the mouth of the rivers with the Semitic Earth Mother 1). The connection of the Delphic omphalos with the snake on the one hand and with chthonian oracular practices on the other 2), offers a striking parallel to the association of the Jerusalem temple with the underworld, the abyss and the myth of the Edenic rivers.

3. In the third place, traces of sun worship in the temple of Jerusalem have been detected and presented in detail, especially by J. Morgenstern, H. G. May, and others 3). Without going as far as F. J. Hollis 4), we may discern the main elements of solar worship in the architectural plan of Solomon's temple, its structure, its orientation, its topographic relation to the Mount of Olives, its decoration, its cultic objects, and also, although indirectly, in the polemic form of the dedication formula 5). It was not through a perversion of original intent but in conformity to conscious and avowed purpose that the "horses of the sun" stood in the sanctuary precincts at the time of Josiah 6) and that rituals of the solar cultus were performed in the

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5) 1 Kgs. viii. 12-13. Cf. Montgomery, The Book of Kings, pp. 189 ff.; Gray, I & II Kings, pp. 195 ff.; North, Könige I, pp. 181 ff. This poem attempts to prevent any confusion between Yahweh and the sun which is thus demythologized in typically Yahwist fashion (cf. Ps. civ 19). The motif of the 'araphel, "thick-darkness" as well as "storm cloud" (cf. Ugaritic 'rp, Akkadian arpu, and Arabic 'arapha; Hebrew 'araph, "to drip, to drop") attempts clearly to relate the Canaanite myth of fertility (Albright, Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan, p. 231) to the Yahwistic tradition of the Sinai theophany (Exod. xx 18; cf. North, Könige I, p. 182).
6) Kgs. xxii. 11; see Montgomery, Kings, p. 532 ff.; Gray, I & II Kings, p. 670.
courtyard and inside the edifice itself at the time of Ezekiel 5. Now, the worship of the sun is not as widespread as sometimes believed, but it is always related to both the cult of the Terra Mater and the ritual manipulation of chthonian forces 6. At Delphi, the cult of Gaea, the Earth Mother, which appears to have been associated from the earliest times to the veneration of the navel stone, was transformed in the course of the centuries into the worship of the solar deity, Phoebos. The great Olympian son, Apollo, is often represented not only as riding with his fiery chariot and his elegant equine retinue, but also seated or standing on the omphalos, while holding laurel branch and a lyre 7. The link between omphalos and sun appears also in many places of the Greek literature, from Euphides to Plutarch 8. Moreover, the Delphic omphalos received another meaning as it came to be regarded also as the tomb of the dismembered Dionysos, the “son of Semele”. Like Apollo, Dionysos appears on the omphalos, holding his thyrsus in his right hand 9. The solar cycle of seasons evolves around the ancient myth of the center of the earth. We have therefore a legitimate basis for conjecturing that the solar cult, which went on in Jerusalem apparently from the time of the erection of the temple, was associated, like the ophidian worship and the ritual concern for the primeval abyss, the chthonian forces and the garden of Eden, to the myth of the omphalos and the adoration of the Terra Mater.

See also the possibility of the solar character of the two pillars (Albright, Archaeology and the Religion of Israel, pp. 148, 216, note 62; H. G. May, “The Two Pillars Before the Temple of Solomon,” BASOR 88, Dec. 1942, p. 27.


6) M. Eliade, “Solar Cults in the Classical East and the Mediterranean,” Patterns in Comparative Religion, pp. 141 ff. According to Ezekiel’s memory or vision, the rites which were practiced in the Jerusalem temple brought together solar worship with “creeping things” (viii 10, 16 ff.). On the sun and the serpent motifs in general, see H. R. Englem, Die Sonne als Symbol, Kusnacht-Zurich 1962, pp. 135 ff., 178.

7) J. Harrison, Themis, pp. 99; fig. 16; cf. pp. 406, 409, fig. 122, 428, fig. 128. There seems to have been a natural attraction of the Apollonian cult to the Delphic omphalos, originally related to the worship of the Terra Mater. See Ch. Picaro, Ephèse et Claros, pp. 110, 463, 494 ff.; Wensinck, Tree and Bird, p. 36 ff. It is well known that the mantic bird is often represented as a symbol of the sun. See also J. Depradas, “L’installation d’Apollon à Delphes,” Les thèmes de la propagande delphique, pp. 19 ff.; H. W. Parke and D. E. W. Wormell, The Delphic Oracle I, pp. 3 ff.; M. Delcourt, L’oracle de Delphes, pp. 31 ff., 144 ff.

8) Euripides, Ion 5; Aeschylus, Eumenides 39; Plutarch, De defectu oraculorum 1; Varro, De lingua latina vii, 17.

9) See a IVth-cent. polychrome vase, Tyskiewicky Collection, Lyons Museum, in Harrison, Themis, pp. 556, fig. 175; cf. p. 557.
4. In the fourth place, the presence of male prostitutes, the * qedeshbim, among the cultic officials of the Jerusalem temple has never been satisfactorily explained, if indeed it is mentioned at all 1). The northern kingdom of Israel had apparently its female prostitutes, whether these were cultic or secular, depending on the exact meaning of the words * qedeshshab and * zonab in the course of the ages 2), but only the * qedeshbim are mentioned in connection with the cultic personnel of the kingdom of Judah 3). The reference to both male and female prostitutes which is found in the Deuteronomic code (xxiii 18) tends merely to confirm the validity of the generally accepted thesis of the northern provenance of such a legislation.

As Joh. Pedersen, R. Dussaud, W. F. Albright, G. W. Ahlström, A. Soggin, and many others have pointed out 4), the fertility rites in the Jerusalem temple should be understood not as the

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3) See 1 Kgs. xiv 23 f.; xv 12; xiiii 46; 2 Kgs. xxiii 7; also in *mt* qeshbim in Hos. ii 7 ff.; Jer. xxii 20, 22; xxx 14; Ezek. xvi 37 ff.; xxi 9; Zech. xiii 16; possibly the nethinim, "dedicated ones" (1 Chr. ix 2; Ezra ii 58; etc.; cf. the Ugaritic yamn (C. H. Gordon, *Ugaritic Manual*, pp. 301 and 237; J. Gray, *The Legacy of Canaan*, p. 158; 2nd ed., 1965, p. 215).

To be sure, the name did not designate male prostitutes in the second temple, but it is probable that the origin of such functionaries went back to Solomon and to the sexual aspect of the Jerusalem temple cultus before the exile. It is significant that Josephus translated the word by lepōthnēl. Cf. B. A. Brooks, "Fertility Cult Functionaries . . . ," p. 233; G. Henton Davies, "Nethinim," *IDB*. III, p. 541; O. Baal, "Prostitution," *IDB*. III, p. 931 f.; M. Haran, "The Gibeonites, the Nethinim and the Sons of Solomon's Servants," *VT*. XI, 1961, p. 165, note 1; 167, notes 1, 3. At Delphi, youths could be dedicated or "vowed" to the Pythian Apollo; H. W. Parker, "Consecration to Apollo," * Hermes*, LXXII 1948, 87 f.

result of a popular corruption that was brought about by pressure of
the masses, but rather as part and parcel of the official religion of the
kingdom. The ceremonial of the temple must have been initiated, or
at least endorsed and maintained by the near unanimity of the Davidic
monarchs for more than three hundred years. If Asa, perhaps Hezekiah,
and Josiah, in three widely separated periods of time, succeeded in
expelling the *qelbosqim* from the Jerusalem sanctuary 1), their re-
spective successors, probably in each case their own sons, hastened
to return to the cultic *status quo.* We may affirm that normative cer-
emonial, in the temple of Solomon, ascribed to the male prostitutes
a prominent place in the ritual. We have to admit, however, that the
theology of male prostitution is far from clear. At Ugarit, in about
1400 B.C., male prostitutes were important enough to be listed in
second place before other temple officials and singers 2). On the basis
of the numerous but elliptical allusions to the *qelbosq* and his cultic
confères in the ancient Near eastern literature, such as the * beleb* or
"dog" 3), possibly the *garim,* a singular noun meaning *castratus,*
according to the suggestion of S. I. FEIGIN 4), also the *kulu,* the
*narguru,* the *assinnu* of the Mesopotamian shrines 5), and — at a later

Cultural Trends in Jerusalem under the Davidic Dynasty," *VT.* III, 1953,
pp. 150 ff.; J. P. ASMUSSEN, "Bemerkungen zur Sakralen Prostitution im Alten
Testament," *Studia Theologica,* X 1957, pp. 117 ff.; S. H. HOOKE, "Myth and
E. O. JAMES, "The Fertility Cults," *Myth and Ritual in the Ancient Near East,
E. EAKIN, Jr., "Yahwism and Baalism Before the Exile," *JBL.* LXXIV, 1965,
pp. 412; R. RENDTORFF, "El, Baal und Jahwe: Erwägungen zum Verhältnis von
kananäischer und Israelitischer Religion," *ZAW.* LXXVIII, 1966, pp. 277 ff.;
J. GRAY, "Social Aspects of Canaanite Religion," *Suppl. VT,* XV, Congrès,

1) 1 Kgs. xxii 46; 2 Kgs. xxiii 7; cf. 2 Kgs. xvii 4, which is silent on male
prostitutes but mentions the eradication of objects related to the worship of the
Mother-Goddess.

2) Ch. VIROLLEAUD, "États nominaux et pièces comptables," *Syria* XVIII,

3) Deut. xxiii 19; Job xxxvi 14; Cf. D. WINTON THOMAS, "Kelleb, 'Dog': Its

4) S. I. FEIGIN, K. C. "Hambr Garim," *Castrated Ass,* *JNES.* VI, 1946,

5) The distinction between the *qelbosq* and the *kemarin* or other *castrati* is
not clear. See W. F. ALBRIGHT, "Historical and Mythical Elements in the Story
of Joseph: 'The Galli'," *JBL.* XXXVII, 1918, p. 116; "Some Cruces in the
Langdon Epic," *JAOS.* XXXIX, 1919, pp. 88 ff.; G. Dossin, *Archives royales de
Mari,* X, Paris 1967, no. 7; *La divination en Mésopotamie et dans les régions voisines,
Paris 1966, p. 82; H. B. HUFFMON, "Prophecy in the Mari Letters," *BA.* XXXI,
age — the gallus and the cinaedus of Asia Minor and Phoenicia, it may be affirmed that the ritual of male prostitution was one of the most characteristic manifestations of devotion to the Magna Mater, the Earth Mother \(^\text{1}\). It is perhaps worth noting that modern psychoanalytical research tends to confirm that male homosexuality appears to be related either to maternal fixation or to the castration fear-and-fascination complex. Conceivably, the function of the male prostitutes in the Jerusalem temple as well as in the other shrines of the Ancient Near East was related to an ecstatic form of divination technique \(^\text{2}\). One may even go a step farther and suggest that the cherubim, whose precise identification and symbolism have eluded the searching inquiries of such scholars as P. DHORME, W. F. ALBRIGHT, M. HARAN, and R. de VAUX \(^\text{3}\), may have been sculpted representations of the-


\(^{1}\) The association of male prostitution with sun worship on the one hand and with devotion to the Terra Mater on the other may be related to the bisexuality of the sun among the various Semitic religions. The female aspect of the solar deity is attested at Ugarit as well as in South Arabia. See A. CAQUOT, “La divinité solaire ougaritique,” *Syria* XXXVI, 1959, p. 90, note 1.

\(^{2}\) The correspondence of the Hebrew word *qebeshim* in Jerusalem and of the Greek word *Hosioi* at Delphi may be more than coincidental. It is probable that the Galloii practiced the art of divination through physio-psychological trance, which in turn was related to telluric rites. See H. GRAILLOT, *Le culte de Cybèle*, pp. 307 ff.; Ch. PICARD, *Épites et Clares*, pp. 226, 233 ff., 555, note 5. While the character and function of the Galloii remain mysterious, those of the *Hosioi* are clearly associated with oracular procedure. The *Hosioi* are, however, distinct from both the Prophētai and the *Hitéres*. E. W. PARKER, “A Note on the Delphic Priesthood,” *Classical Quarterly*, XXXIV 1940, p. 87; M. DELCOURT, *L’oracle de Delphes*, pp. 46 ff., 155 f.


On several representations found in Syria, animals appear as guardians of the sacred tree. E. de PORADA, “Treize cylindres-écrits...” *Revue d’Asyoïologie et d’Archéologie Orientale* XXXV, 1938, p. 188, fig. 5.; 189 ff.; A. DESSENE, *Le sphinx, étude iconographique*, I, Paris 1951, p. 181; In Greece, the sphinx appears helmeted and harnessed to a carriage; cf. id., “Le sphinx, d’après l’iconographie jusqu’à
riomorphic and anthropomorphic hybrid creatures which were borrowed from the Phoenician-Canaanite cultus and were presumably related both to the belief in the omphalos myth with its association to the Magna Mater and to the ritual of cultic male prostitution. There is no compelling evidence to the effect that the cherubim should be viewed as sphinxes endowed with wings. The representations of the omphalos in Greece, on the one hand, and of the Earth Goddess in the Eastern Mediterranean world, on the other, include again and again the images of pairs or couples of birds, lions, goats, rams, etc., including hybrid combinations of features which are derived from various animal species. The cherubim may well be the attributes of the bisexual character of the type of worship which was associated to the myth of the earth navel. As it is well known, the


2) The cherubim were not only the sculpted figures of olive wood which stood in close proximity to the ark (1 Sam. iv 4; 2 Sam. vi 2; 1 Kgs. vi 23 f.; viii 6 f.) but also the carved representations which appeared on the gold-plated (?) cedar wood panelling on the inner walls of the hekah and on the olive wood doors (1 Kgs. vi 29 f.; 2 Chr. iii 7). They alternated with palm-trees and open flower-calyces (1 Kgs. vii 29, 31-35; cf. Ezek. xii 18 ff.), symbols which suggested, as much as the bronze pomegranates (1 Kgs. vii 18), the fertility of the Terra Mater. The relation of the temple cherubim to those of the garden of Eden (Gen. iii 24) and to the storm-clouds (2 Sam. xxii 11; Ps. viii 11) points to the same aspect of the Canaanite myth and ritual.

rabbinical literature has preserved traditions which link the cherubim with the fertility of the earth, and one strange text in the Babylonian Talmud (Yoma 54a-b) reads: "Resh Laqish said, When the heathens entered the Temple and saw the cherubim whose bodies were intertwined with one another, they carried them out and said: These Israelites, whose blessing is a blessing and whose curse is a curse, occupy themselves with such things. And immediately they despised them..."

At any rate, we shall observe that the mention of the qeddeshlim is restricted to the kingdom of Judah, and may well have been related to the ceremonial of Maacah's cultic object, the mysterious miphleseb (1 Kings xv 13), which Jerome rendered as simulacrum Priapi 2). A similar ritual, perhaps performed for the sake of a similar object, may have been meant by Ezekiel when he attacked the practices which were still performed in the temple at the beginning of the sixth century B. C. (Ezek. viii 7-13; cf. xvi 17). In the light of the foregoing discussion, it will not be surprising to note that Ezekiel is associating such ceremonial with opthidian worship (vs. 10) and the rites of the solar cult (vss. 16-18).

In all probability, the office of the Gebhirah, or "Queen Mother," which appeared to be peculiar to the kingdom of Judah, had a cultic function which is no longer clear from the present documents. Thanks to the studies of G. Molin, H. Donner, G. W. Ahlström, and others 3), one might suggest that such a function had a role to play


in the mystical or sacramental aspect of the principle of monarchical succession. With only two exceptions, those of Joram (2 Kgs. viii 10 ff.) and of Ahaz (2 Kgs. xvi 1), the names of the mothers of all the kings of Judah are carefully mentioned in the archives that were apparently used by the editor of Kings 1. The worship of Asherah at the court of Judah 2, by most of the Davidic kings and queens, thus brings together in remarkable fashion a number of cultic elements which are superficially heterogeneous but may appear to revolve, in the Ancient Near East, in Asia Minor, and in Greece at a later age, as revolving around the myth of the omphalos — chthonian forces, sacred snake, solar ritual, male prostitution, bisexuality.

By using due caution, and cognizant of the paucity of the available information, are we not permitted to conjecture that the construction of the Solomonic temple introduced at the heart of Yahwism the pre-Davidic belief in the myth of the omphalos, and that this myth, in turn, was deemed to be useful, with all the ritual it entailed, as a support for the concept of hereditary monarchy?

One may even ask whether Abimelech's abortive attempt at creating a dynasty had not already been associated to the myth of the earth navel at Shechem. In addition to the belief that Shechem was called the tabbur ba'ares (Judg. ix 27), the mysterious țereb in the temple of El-Berith (Judg. ix 46, 49), which the LXX 3 translates συνέλευσις, "coming together," probably in a sexual sense 3, may well have been a holy crypt dedicated to the worship of the Earth Mother 4.

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2. Judges ix 49, LXX 3; this is the primary sense of the word in Hellenistic Greek (Vettius Valens, Ptolemaeus, Plutarch, et al.). The meaning "stronghold" is not attested elsewhere (Liddell-Scott, 1707).
II

The myth of the omphalos in Jerusalem passed through several interpretations as it was gradually adapted to the religion of Yahweh, and — vice versa — its incorporation within Yahwism profoundly influenced and altered Judah's faith. Religious rituals and beliefs are always mixed in subtle fashion. The conjecture which is here presented, on the basis of a remarkable conglomeration of motifs which otherwise would remain thoroughly heterogeneous — chthonian rites, snake-cult, solar worship, male cultic prostitution, the place of the queen mother, bisexuality — may help us to understand concretely the ambivalent character of the Zion theology.

The appropriation of the omphalos myth in the pre-exilic temple circles was combined with the prophetic belief in the election of Zion. The significance and the effect of this synthesis upon nascent Judaism during the exilic and post-exilic times cannot be ascertained in a demonstrable manner, in view of the reticence of the documents. Nevertheless, the following tentative suggestions may be advanced for the purpose of eliciting further discussion.

1. In spite of the Jebus-inspired syncretism which officially prevailed at the temple of Solomon for more than three-and-a-half centuries, theologians of Yahwism attempted to maintain or to revive the faith in a Covenant God, as witnessed in particular by the reforms of Asa, Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah and Josiah 1). Based originally on the Jebusite myth on the navel of the earth, the Zion theology became historicized into a theology of the election of David and Jerusalem 2). At the same time, a complex undercurrent persisted in the court and temple circles. Originally conceived as conditional upon man's historical response to covenant obligations, David's choice of Jerusalem as an historical agency became mythicized into a motif of

II 1943, p. 75; E. Nielsen, Shechem, pp. 164 ff.; cf. G. E. Wright, Shechem, pp. 255, note 190. Wright maintains that the *omphalos* cannot be a crypt "because the temple had none" (id., 127).

1) 1 Kgs. xiv 23 f.; xv 12; 22 46; 2 Kgs. xxiii 7.

unconditional permanence 1). The traditions of the Sinai covenant, the validity and continuity of which were originally dependent upon the ethical as well as cultic response of Israel in history 2), ultimately coalesced with the traditions of the Davidic covenant 3).

After the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C., it was above all the belief in the Zion-space myth which enabled the surviving Judahites to maintain their sociological identity and thus to create Judaism. It was precisely at that moment that the prophet Ezekiel explicitly referred to Jerusalem as the navel of the earth 4). Other factors, of course, played a part in enabling the uprooted Judahites to resist cultural disintegration 5) and thereby to become the Jews. It was, however, the belief in the myth of Zion as the cosmic um-


5) E.g., the relatively moderate policies of the imperial government of Babylon toward the relocated populations (M. Noth, “The Jerusalem Catastrophe of 587 B.C., and its Significance for Israel,” The Laws in the Pentateuch . . ., p. 260); the teaching of the prophets on national guilt; the letter of Jeremiah to the first exiles (Jer. 29:1 ff.); the community spirit of the exiles in Tell Aviv, fostered by Ezekiel’s pastoral ministry; the singing of the psalms and the paracutic activity of poets like that of Job at the time of the autumn festival; the work of the keepers of the national traditions; etc. See M. Noth, The History of Israel, tr. by S. Godman, New York 1958, pp. 288 ff.; J. Bright, A History of Israel, Philadelphia, n. d., pp. 328 ff.
bicolon — the eternal bond between heaven and earth — which conferred a shape to the eschatological hope of nascent Judaism.

2. Such a hope was eventually transformed by the return of a few priestly families to the site of Zion and the building of a new temple (519-515 B.C.)

3. The myth of the omphalos resulted in a spatialization of the concept of presence. The theology of the sojourning name, which was compatible with the freedom of God and a historical view of the Sinai covenant (conditional), was absorbed by a theology of the indwelling glory, which implied in turn the mythical, supra-historical view of the Davidic covenant (unconditional). It was the spatialization of presence which became the theological basis of Israel's claims to the land surrounding Zion.

3. The spatialization of presence in turn contributed to the dehistoricization of the covenant. The mythical view of the permanence of the Davidic bond was transferred to the people as a whole.

Israel's mission in history became in effect immune to prophetic

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1) Ez. xl 1 ff.; xlvii 1-5; Isa. xl 2; xlv 14 ff.; lii 1 ff.
2) Ezra i 55; Hag. i 2; etc.
6) B. Stein, Der Begriff Kibod Jahwe und seine Bedeutung für die alttestamentliche Gotteserkennenis (Emsdetten i. W., 1939); G. von Rad, Old Testament Theology, I, pp. 239 ff.
judgment against national failure through social oppression or moral injustice. The sense of an "eternal" mission, which is characteristic of certain forms of Judaism, thus transcending the historical relativity of other nations, may be traced, according to this hypothesis, not to Mosaic Yahwism but to Jebusite mythology.

4. The national trauma caused by the destruction of the temple in 587 B.C. resulted in the spread of a collective consciousness of sin, for the indictment of the nation, long repeated by the prophets, appeared now to be verified by events. Awareness of the national guilt, however, seems to have been expressed more often in cultic terms of impurity and uncleanness — words which connoted the realm of sexuality 1) — than in psychological terms of transgression, iniquity, rebelliousness and hardening of the heart, which the pre-exilic prophets had favored 2). To be sure, these prophets had formulated their interpretation of the Mosaic covenant quite often under the familiar metaphors of marriage and adultery 3), but they used sexual imagery almost exclusively in a moral rhetoric of trust and mistrust, loyalty and infidelity, self-giving and self-seeking love. During the exile, on the contrary, Ezekiel, a prophet who was also the son of a Jerusalem priest, employed generally the language of sexual purity and impurity no longer as a metaphorical tool of moral expression but as the speech of his sacerdotal concern for ritual cleanliness, purification and physical avoidance of ritual corruption 4).

1) "Jerusalem has gravely sinned; she has become an impurity" (niddah, Lam. i 8; cf. vs. 17; MT niddah; see LXX, Aqu., Syr.); the word occurs especially in Ezekiel and the priestly legislation: Ezek. xviii 6; xxii 10; xxxvi 17; Lev. xii 2; xv 19 ff.; xx 21; Zech. xiii 1; 2 Chr. xxix 3; Ezra ix 11; etc. The growth of an oral body of legal interpretation led to rabbinic prescriptions and prohibitions (Mishnah, Taboroth, "Niddah," pasim; Babylonian Talmud, Seder Taboroth I, "Niddah," pasim).


4) Ezek. xxiii 1 ff.; pasim. The personification of Zion in maternal terms (N. W. PORTER, "Jerusalem-Zion..." pp. 238 ff.), which followed easily upon
From the earliest times of Semitic culture, sources of ritual pollution seem to have been especially related to sexual secretions 1). It ensued that the whole realm of sexuality entered under the suspicion of the risk of ritual impurity. Beginning with the exilic prophets, the notion of sinfulness remained concerned with social injustice, to be sure, but it also stressed ritual contacts, prohibitions, cleansing and expiation 2).

While the available documents do not explicitly indicate the awareness of a link between the omphalos myth and the sexualizing process of the notion of sinfulness, it is probable that the exilic theology of Zion, while rejecting the chthonian and ophidian rites, solar cult, male prostitution and bisexuality, which had officially accompanied the worship of the Terra Mater in the Jerusalem temple during most of the Divided Monarchy, over-reacted against the persistent fascination of many Judahites with the fertility cults during the exile and even afterwards 3). The priestly members of the Zadokite families who interpreted the early traditions of Mosaic Yahwism and the

the prophetic comparison of Israel with the unfaithful bride, may well be an unconscious by-product of the worship of the Terra Mater.


2) R. PATAR, “Sins and Calamities,” Man and Temple . . ., pp. 140 ff. It is of course well known that the priestly concern for purity and impurity was ancient (G. VON RAD, Old Testament Theology, I, p. 272), but it was during the exile, when the political and cultic structures of national life had disappeared, that the descendants of the Jerusalem priest, among whom Ezekiel assumed apparently a prominent place, convinced many Judahites of the need for outward and therefore ritual signs of distinctiveness like circumcision, sabbath, and practises related to the clean and to the unclean. This trend received official sanction with the authoritative acceptance of the Torah, in which the holiness legislation played a conspicuous role. See W. GISPEN, “The Distinction Between Clean and Unclean,” Oudt. St. V, 1948, pp. 190 ff.; K. ELLICHER, “Das Gesetz Leviticus 18,” ZAW. LXVII, 1955, pp. 1 ff., especially 23; L. E. ELLIOTT-BINNS, “Some Problems in the Holiness Code,” ZAW. LXVII, 1955, pp. 26 ff.; H. Graf REVENTLOW, Das Heiligkeitssatz, Berlin 1964, pp. 192 ff.
Deuteronomic Kerygma in the light of their obsession with cultic purity tended irresistibly to view sinfulness in terms of sexuality rather than as moral rebellion and social irresponsibility.

The priestly legislation which now dominates the framework of the Torah accelerated a trend, among some purity-minded Jews, toward a devalorization of sexuality and a consequent diffidence toward womanhood 1), except as a maternal function 2) and in the context of heroism in devotion to the national cause 3).

4. If the growth of the emphasis on rites of purification for sin in the second temple is ascribed to the direct influence of, and the indirect reaction against, the Jebusite myth of the omphalos as transformed into a Zion theology, one must also relate to the same myth the alteration of the notion of faith which appeared to have taken place among the ritual and legal party. Within post-exilic Judaism, faith tended to confuse the demands of an always threatening as well as comforting God with the obedient performance of ritual acts of initiation and observance 4).

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1) The Yahwist's tradition on the ideal of marital love (Gen. ii 24) represented for early Israel the highest view of monogamy in the ancient Near East, and was echoed in some respects by the erotic simplicity of the Song of Songs. Such a view, unencumbered with cultic prohibition on sexual uncleanness, must have been sufficiently widespread among some circles of the pre-exilic period. Otherwise, the prophets could have not have expected to be understood when they compared Israel to the bride of Yahweh and the covenant to a marriage of trust and of mutual obligation. The ascetic tendencies which were markedly apparent in the post-exilic period (L. M. Epstein, Sex Laws and Customs in Judaism, New York 1948, pp. 8 ff.) were probably related to the fear of sexual pollution that was stressed by the legislation of holiness.

2) The ritual concern for racial purity in the IVth century B.C. led not only to a ban on interracial marriage but also to the repudiation of foreign wives (Ezr. x 3, 44), a measure which implies the superiority of religious collective concerns over the respect for the individual feminine personality. Cf. L. M. Epstein, Marriage Laws in the Bible and Talmud, Cambridge, Mass., 1942, pp. 144 ff.; E. Neufeld, "Divorce," Ancient Hebrew Marriage Laws, London, 1944, pp. 176 ff.

3) See the legendary figures of Esther, Judith, et al.

The importance of the omphalos myth for Hebrew religion cannot be underestimated. The ideology of Zion, which became central to the main form of Judaism in exilic and post-exilic times, appears to have carried with it a persistent ambivalence: on the one hand, it belonged to the archaic belief in mythical geography, which is unable to dissociate the sacred from the topos \(^1\), and finds therein an exceptionally powerful source of religious and sociological coherence. On the other hand, it participates, through the prophetic interpretation of the Mosaic covenant, in the possibility to absorb a mythical view of space into a dynamic theology of time, based on a teleology of election, which is therefore open to religious, moral, and political transformation according to the changing conditions of history \(^2\).
