



# The Death of the God Tammuz

From the most primitive times, human beings knew that, in order to bring forth more crops or more children, 'the seed must die' and be buried.

This fundamental principle applied whether it was the seed of grains and plants that were buried in the womb of the Mother Earth or seed of animals and humans planted in the wombs of their females. This notion was embodied in the rites of Ancient Mysteries that celebrated the death and revival of the God himself as an image and type of the cycle of life and death and life, once more.

**N**OWHERE WERE THESE RITES SO widely celebrated than in the lands which we now generally call the Middle East, from Greece in the west to Mesopotamia in the east, and Egypt in the south, especially in rites celebrating the death and resurrection of the God himself.

Under the names Tammuz, Adonis, Attis and Osiris, the peoples of Egypt and Western Asia celebrated the yearly death and revival of life, especially of fruit, crops and other vegetation. They personified this cycle as a God who annually died and rose again from the dead. In name and detail the rites varied from place to place. In principle, they were the same.

## Tammuz

The worship of Tammuz was practised by the peoples of Babylonia and Syria. In the legends of Babylon, Tammuz appears as the youthful lover of Ishtar, the great mother goddess who is the embodiment of the reproductive energies of nature.

These myths told of an ancient time when Tammuz died every year, passing away from the cheerful earth to the gloomy underworld. Every year, his divine mistress Ishtar would journey in quest of him "to the land from which there is no returning, to the house of darkness, where dust lies on door and bolt."

During her absence, the passion of love ceased to operate. Men and beasts alike forgot to reproduce, and all life was threatened with extinction. A messenger of the great god Ea was

accordingly sent to the underworld to rescue the Goddess Ishtar on whom so much depended.

The stern goddess of the infernal regions, Eresh-Kigal, reluctantly allowed Ishtar to depart in company with her lover Tammuz, so that the two might return to the upper world, and that with their return all nature might revive.

Laments for the departed Tammuz are contained in hymns that liken him to plants that quickly fade. He is:

*A tamarisk in the garden that has drunk no water,*

*A tree in the field that has brought forth no blossom.*

*A willow that rejoices not by the watercourse*

*A willow whose roots are torn up.*

*A herb that in the garden has drunk no water.*

## The summer month of Tammuz

His death was mourned each year to the shrill music of flutes by men and women in the month that was named after him, the midsummer month of Tammuz.

Mourning laments were chanted over an image of the dead god, which was washed with pure water, anointed with oil, and clad in a red robe, while the fumes of incense rose into the air, as if to stir his sleeping senses by their fragrance to wake him from the sleep of death.

The rites of Tammuz were celebrated with much solemnity at two places in Western Asia. One of these was Byblos on the coast of Syria, the other was Paphos in Cyprus. Both were great seats of the worship of Astarte. Byblos stood on a height beside the sea, and contained

a great sanctuary of Astarte, where in the midst of a spacious open court, surrounded by cloisters and approached from below by staircases, rose a tall cone or obelisk, the holy image of the Goddess. Within this sanctuary the rites of Tammuz were celebrated. Indeed the whole city was sacred to him. And the River Nahr Ibrahim, which leads to the sea a little south of Byblos bore Tammuz's name in ancient times.