

myths of EGYPT AND MESOPOTAMIA

Their influence on
modern world views

by Michael Freedman

This article looks at the historical reasons why there persist to this day in our Western culture, two very different views of the place of humankind within the universe.

These are characterised by the pessimistic, fundamentalist religious point of view, at one extreme, and the optimistic, liberal humanist view, at the other. The world views of magicians, witches and pagans are generally liberal and humanist.



(c) Where Abu Temple



LOOKING at the cosmos that was used by Classical, Medieval and Renaissance magicians, you can see that, like the astronomy of those days, it was geocentric, i.e., earth centred.

The people of those eras, with very few exceptions, believed that the Earth was at the centre of the entire universe.

Today, every human being with a little schooling is aware *intellectually* that the Earth is a small planet circling an average sized sun a fair way out on one of the spiral arms of a modestly sized galaxy. Our galaxy, which has in the past been called the Milky Way, is just one member of a cluster of galaxies. This cluster is called by some the Supergalaxy. There are millions of galactic clusters throughout the universe.

Left: Marduk of Babylon. Above: Osiris of Egypt.

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All this is very well as an intellectual concept. Nevertheless, psychologically and magically, each one of us knows at a very deep gut level:

"I am at the centre of my universe, both materially and spiritually."

All the billions of planets, sun, systems, galaxies and clusters of galaxies actually circle around each individual, from that individual's point of view.

It is for this reason, that astrology remains geocentric, earth centred; and natal astrological charts are drawn for the very spot on earth where the individual was born.

Common ancient ideas about the creation

The two most important areas of ancient civilisation, in terms of their influence on later Western thinking were Mesopotamia and Egypt. Both civilisations are of similar age. Both had won the lands on which they lived by draining the swamps beside their rivers.

Therefore, the cosmologies of both lands embodied the idea that in the beginning, there existed only the primeval waters. Then, the Creator God said or did something to make the dry land appear. The Creator God was called Marduk⁴ in Babylon, and Osiris or Ra in Egypt, in different versions of the myth.

An ancient rationalist creation myth

The first rational Greek philosopher was Thales of Miletus. He visited Egypt and brought back to Greece the knowledge of geometry which the Egyptians had developed in building their mighty temples and pyramids.

He had become familiar with the Egyptian creation myths while in that land, and used them to develop his rationalist philosophy of how the world came into being. As a rationalist, Thales left out any reference to a creator god. He and his fellow Greek philosophers went on to develop the idea of the Four Elements of Nature as we know it today.

Egypt and Mesopotamia were different

Egypt and Mesopotamia shared a common view of how the world began, but they were very different in how they viewed the world as it is. Both civilisations were built around mighty rivers: Egypt along the banks of the Nile; and Mesopotamia in the fertile area between the rivers Tigris and Euphrates. Mesopotamia means "between the rivers."

But here the resemblance ends. Throughout its entire history, Egypt was rarely ruled by any but Egyptian Pharaohs, until its conquest by the Greeks under Alexander the Great. The Roman war-leader Julius Caesar took Egypt from its Greek rulers. Egypt never ruled itself again before the 20th century c.e.

The world between the rivers Tigris and Euphrates was successively ruled by Sumer, Akkad, the Hittites, Assyrians, Babylonians and Persians, before it also came under first Greek and then Roman rule.

A confident and stable Egypt

Ancient Egypt was built on an attitude that was the expression of a frontier spirit of visible accomplishments and success. Egypt expressed a youthful and self-reliant arrogance, because there never had been any significant setbacks to the advance of Egyptian civilisation. Humans were enough in themselves.

The Gods? Yes, they were off there somewhere and they had made this world to be sure. But, if the world was good and they generally believed it to be so, it was because humankind was the master of it and had built it so over the centuries. There was no need for the constant support of the gods in this world.

Of course, things were believed to be different in the after-life. Human God-Kings, the Pharaohs, were the source of all good in this world. The Gods would provide all in the after-life, hence the elaborate Egyptian burial cult that reached its most extravagant expression in the Great Pyramids of Gizeh.

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This enormous self-confidence was built on an experience of nature that was inherently stable. The sun, moon and stars were regular in the heavens, while the Nile was just as regular on the earth. It rose on the same days each year. It brought its rich silt and refreshing waters at the same time each year without fail. Egypt was a land that was sure of itself and it produced a people that were sure of themselves.

The Gods at war in unstable Mesopotamia

Mesopotamian civilisation arose and grew in an environment signally different from that of Egypt. The Mesopotamian peoples also knew the regularity of the cosmic rhythms, the changes of the seasons, the unwavering cycles of sun, moon and stars. Indeed, they probably studied the heavens more thoroughly and for far longer than the Egyptians.

But, the forces of Nature were far more violent and unpredictable than in Egypt. The Tigris and Euphrates are not like the Nile. They rise and fall unpredictably and their violence in flood breaks human dykes and submerges his crops. There are scorching winds that smother farms and cities in dust and threaten to suffocate their inhabitants. Torrential rains turn all firm ground into a sea of mud and rob the people of freedom of movement.

In Egypt, men stood proudly in their strength, not realising that they did it only because of the support of the regular and bountiful elements of Nature. To the Egyptians, the cosmos was safe and reassuring.

In Mesopotamia, humans were never tempted to overrate themselves, as they contemplated the contending powers in Nature, showing itself in thunderstorm, drought and flood. Behind the forces of Nature, the Mesopotamians sensed a multitude of powerful, individual, divine wills, gods and goddesses who were perpetually divergent, perpetually in conflict.

Orderliness vs. Conflict

The Egyptians saw the orderliness of the cosmos as inherently stable and saw that eternal stability reflected in the world around them.

The Mesopotamians saw cosmic order as **as** something that was in constant threat of **of** being overthrown by gigantic and wilful individual powers. Cosmic order was not something to be taken for granted, but something that could only be achieved by constant struggle against the forces of chaos that threatened it.

We see the differences between these two cultures in their myths about the gods of evil.

Set and Osiris

In Egypt, Set, the god of evil, murdered Osiris and cut him into pieces, but the goddess Isis gathered the pieces together and restored him to life, after which she conceived their son Horus. The myth of the death and resurrection of Osiris became part of Egyptian belief that if death or sorrow came, then they would surely be followed by rebirth and restoration.

The optimistic Egyptian world-view is **is** confirmed by what became the central drama of the Egyptian religion in the later periods of its history;

ACT I

The struggle between evil Set, brother of Isis, and good Osiris, the consort of Isis, results in the death of Osiris.

ACT II

Scene 1: The search for and recovery of the dismembered body of Osiris by Isis;

Scene 2: The resurrection of Osiris and his union with Isis before his ascent to the heavens;

Scene 3: The subsequent birth of Horus, son of Isis and Osiris.

ACT III

Scene 1: The battle between Horus and the murderer of his father, Set, results in the victory of Horus;

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Scene 2: Isis intervenes to prevent the death of Set;

Scene 3: Reconciliation between Horus and Set brings peace on earth.

The Scorpio [November] Festivals

The murder of Osiris is said to have taken place "on the 17th day of Athyr, when the Sun was in Scorpio" [Plutarch]. There follows a listing of the Festivals celebrating this cosmic drama that were held in Egypt during the period equivalent of our month of November.

- Nov. 1-6, The Death of Osiris; the Isia, the 6 day search for Osiris, begins.
- Nov. 7 Rebirth of Osiris
- Nov. 10 Festival of Ba-Neb-De Det, God of fertility and sexual union
- Nov. 12 Isis and Nephthys weep over the death of Osiris
- Nov. 13 The dismemberment of Osiris
- Nov. 14 Festival of Isis, Ruler of Heaven, Earth, Sea and Underworld
- Nov. 19 Horus ascends to the throne of Osiris
- Nov. 22 Reconciliation of Horus and Set brings peace on earth.
- Nov. 23 The Judgement and Union of Horus and Set
- Nov. 24 Feast of Jubilation at the Union of Horus and Set

It is significant that the Sun moves out of Scorpio, the zodiac sign of Death, and into Sagittarius, the sign of Resurrection, on November 22nd or 23rd each year.

These festivals were being celebrated in Egypt during that period when the Greeks first visited and then conquered Egypt. Greeks ruled over, lived in and were influenced by Egypt for 300 years, until the Romans took control of the entire Mediterranean world, to preserve and pass down to us Europeans the myth and cultural attitudes of the peoples dwelling around the eastern Mediterranean.

Ahriman and Ahura Mazda

In Mesopotamia, the equivalent myth reached their final expression in the dualism of the Zoroastrian religion, which teaches that there has been from the beginning of time a perpetual conflict between the Wise Lord Ahura Mazda the good God of Light, and Ahriman, the evil God of Darkness.

It was taught and piously believed that, at some future, unspecified date, the heavenly hosts of the Wise Lord Ahura Mazda would overthrow the evil forces of the dark Lord Ahriman.

However, the ultimate victory of the forces of good over the forces of destruction is in the far distant future. Meanwhile, on the earth in which humankind lives, the current state of the conflict is that the evil Lord Ahriman has won the most recent of the cosmic battles, forcing the good, Wise Lord Ahura Mazda, to flee from the world, 'as far as the sun is from the earth.'

This is why the world is such a wicked place and why human beings, despite their best efforts, always seem to be overwhelmed by the tempests of evil, hatred and sorrow.

Christianity derived its ideas of an Adversary, the Satan, perpetually at war with God from the Mesopotamian religions, via Judaism. You will remember that the Jews were taken into captivity in Babylon and stayed there for several generations, until the Persian king, Cyrus allowed them to return to Jerusalem.

Mesopotamian pessimism and Original sin

It is from the Mesopotamian pessimism that fundamentalist Christianity derives most of its peculiar theology, most notably, their belief in Original Sin, which states that humankind is irretrievably evil and mired in sin. Nothing that any human being can do can result in anything but evil, for the Devil is the Lord of this world. Only the intervention of the armies of God, again at some future unspecified date [Armageddon]

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will can drive evil from the earth. These Mesopotamian ideas did not creep into the Jewish and Christian Scriptures until very late in their evolution, but they have had an enormous influence on many forms of the Christian religion, particularly those that emphasise belief in the Christian Bible as the literal word of God, to be believed in its every detail; and basic sinfulness of humankind. They usually style themselves Fundamentalist.

Egyptian optimism leads to Greek humanism

The optimistic world-view of the Egyptian mythology had a strong influence on Greek thought, probably because to a large degree, it accorded with it.

As the rationalist viewpoint in Greek thinking became more prominent, there was an increasing emphasis on the ability of humankind to improve itself through education and cultivation of truth, beauty and goodness, which were seen as the ultimate ideals on which the Universe was based.

When the original writings of the Greek philosophers and the Hermetic [Gnostic] authors of Grecian Egypt were rediscovered by European scholarship after the Fall of Byzantium in the 15th century, it led to the rise of what is generally known as the Humanist Renaissance.

The Rise of European Humanism

The old medieval view of the world being held in thrall by Satan and his legions, only to be rescued by the intervention of Christ coming again in Judgement was opposed by a new view that began to see the limitless possibilities of the human race, as humans.

The humanistic viewpoint was not necessarily opposed to religion, but as the centuries passed, it did increasingly become identified with an agnostic or atheistic point of view. This process reached its culmination in the foundation of the Humanist and Rationalist societies of the 19th century, which were almost identical in their beliefs and their opposition to any kind of religious belief or practice

The Human Potential movement

However, during the 20th century, we have seen the development of points of view generally subsumed under such names as Jungian Psychology, Humanistic Psychology, Transpersonal Psychology and James Hillman's Revisionist Psychology.

Hillman in Revising Psychology places particular emphasis on a need for a restoration of a pluralistic or polytheistic point of view.

A general term that embraces all these individual approaches is the Human Potential movement.

These points of view emphasise the potential humankind has for growth and improvement, while also acknowledging to a great or lesser degree the value of religious and other spiritual mythologies as part of the growth process for individuals and the human race as a whole.

Modern Paganism and Neo-paganism owes more to the Human Potential movement than it sometimes realises. While few Humanist psychologists realise that they are expressing in modern terms similar concepts to those held by many Witches and Magicians down through the ages. ■



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