THE MYTHOLOGY OF PRE-ISRAELITE SHECHEM

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Concomitant with, and in part arising from, the current excavations at Shechem, there has been considerable scholarly research devoted to the topography of the ancient city 1), that is to the identification and location of the various features which appear in the scriptural record. Whatever may have been its effect in clarifying biblical understanding, this research has had one result—as yet little marked. It has collected and emphasised the evidence of what can be called “The Mythology” of Shechem, for beneath the costume of their biblical “personae” these features are clearly to be recognised as pertaining to another, earlier, religious drama. Such religious transmutations are normal enough, indeed are a banality, but what distinguishes the Shechem circumstances and renders them worthy of report is the extraordinary completeness with which the evidence of the earlier “myth” has survived.

No one can fail to be impressed by some parallels manifested between historical Shechem and Delphi 2). Centrally situated in their respective regions, each is a natural place of solemn convocation and this centricity is underlined by the claim to be at “the navel of the earth” 3) Both are places where the divine purpose is made manifest. Shechem had its oak of divination 4) while the oracles of Apollo at Delphi were originally given in connection with his sacred tree 5).

2) The literature on Delphi is endless; for useful compressed accounts v. DAREMBURG and SAGLIO, Dictionnaire des Antiquités IV pp. 197-200 (under Omphalos); PAULLY-WISSOWA Real Encyclopädie Supp. V, Cols. 61ff. PARKE and WORMELL The Delphic Oracle Oxford 1956 provides a reasonably brief, comprehensive survey. F. FONTENROSE, Python, Los Angeles 1959, is a discursive account of the comparative religion of some aspects of the Delphic myth.
3) At Shechem v. Jdg ix 37 (SOGGIN, pp. 190 and 194, gives a commentary with references). The Omphalos was the most famous and generally accepted as the most primitive feature at Delphi, cf. PARKE and WORMELL, p. 6.
4) v. Jdg. IX 37 (SOGGIN, pp. 190-1)
5) This should be a Laurel or a Bay (cf. PARKE and WORMELL, pp. 11 and 25ff.)
Such points of resemblance could be extended, but in the first instance this may serve to draw attention to the possibility of some basic and wide-spread "myth" lying behind the assemblage of features at Shechem which posterity deemed worthy of notice.

To outline this myth is not easy since it is a configuration of the central facts of experience—creation and destruction, life and death, reality and unreality with the eternal cycle thereof. Thus there are unlimited variations and interconnections to what follows, and the ideas may be and are given variously a cosmic, an ethic or a mystic understanding.

At the centre whence proceeded the creation out of chaos of the three worlds, was established a garden itself centering around a tree which grew by or out of the "navel" of all things where ordinary space and time became of a different order 1). This tree which gives knowledge and power over life and death is the axis of intercommunication between the three divided worlds. It is the tree of life irrigated by the waters of life and is, or ought to be, to property of a divine man-king (a good shepherd or gardener) who tends the tree in the interest of mankind (and is himself a manifestation of the tree).

This myth is, of course, the "paradise garden" myth of creation commonly associated with Eden. Various elements or echoes of it are, however, encountered, from one end of the ancient world to another, be it in Delphi, Eridu 2), Buddhagaya 3), Jerusalem or New Jerusalem 4), and it is submitted that likewise the religious memorials at Shechem reflect some aspects of this myth.

Before seeking to interpret the Shechem evidence in this light, it is advisable to survey in brief the concepts (or symbols) concerned, and to limit so far as possible their associations to the purpose in hand, for the ramifications of these associations are almost infinite. With the creation itself resulting from the victorious combat with and dismemberment of the chaos monster there is nothing of concern at Shechem; and this question may be deleted from the discussion. Nor is there any presumption to reckon with the persons involved, creators,

1) cf. The Pythia's interesting claim that to her all time and space were one.
2) Eridu is the Sumerian prototype of the biblical Eden, its paradise legend has been considered many times; cf. W. F. Allbright "the Mouth of the Rivers", The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literature 35, 1919, pp. 161-195.
3) The enlightenment of the Buddha under the historical "Bo" Tree near Buddh Gaya is the crucial article of Buddhist belief and this tree is very definitely presented as the Tree of Life at the Centre of the World, cf. (for convenience) A. Coomaraswamy, Elements of Buddhist Iconography, Harvard 1935.