



Jerusalem and its Gods

A Review of Ancient Astral Worship and 'Jerusalem'

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The crescent moon shape and twin spheres in this bust are echoed in physical creations all over the ancient Near East and Arabia and appear to reflect early astral worship. Here, they also connote a woman's body. This Bronze Age bust can be viewed at the Amman Archeological Museum.
Source: Voyage en Jordanie, p. 66.

In modern discourse, the 'holy city' of Jerusalem is understood as a precious commodity, 'owned' by the major monotheistic traditions. These understandings are derived from the religious texts of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. For many years, however, those same texts have also been the focus of academic study. How did they come into being? Who 'wrote' them or recorded their oral narratives, and why? How were they edited, and for what purpose? And finally, what are their relationships to 'history' as it can be uncovered in archeology and texts that were not canonized? These studies suggest that the history of 'Jerusalem' as a concept appears to have roots much older than the known physical history of the city. In the ancient world as today, ideas passed from culture to culture, being shaped by their transmitter/s. 'Jerusalem', too—as a

word, a phrase, a concept—seems to have been part of the broad milieu of traditions, among them the worship of the sun, moon and stars, that shaped the ancient Near East and Arabia. This essay will review those traditions and the connections between them through a variety of sources, including the canonized texts of the monotheistic religions.

Volumes of academic writings have accumulated describing how the Hebrew Bible references the past, rewriting traditions evidenced in earlier written works and circulating in antiquity. A body of work exists describing how the various redactors of the Bible drew on what their readers knew about a host of deities to establish the primacy of one god. Scholars continue to dig beneath this textual polemic, looking at word forms, borrowed names and echoes of earlier traditions to try to gain better understanding of what came before the Bible.

An example of how this textual “un-reading” is carried out can be demonstrated through the text of Joshua 10:10-16. Here the Lord (Hebrew: ‘Yahweh’) assists Joshua in routing the Amorites. But in the course of battle, Joshua does something peculiar for a mortal. “Stand still, O sun, at Gibeon, O moon, in the Valley of Aijalon!” he demands.

And the sun [Hebrew: ‘shams’] stood still and the moon halted. While a nation wreaked judgment on its foes – as is written in the book of Jashar. Thus the sun halted in mid-heaven, and did not press on to set for a whole day; Neither before nor since has there ever been such a day when the Lord acted on words spoken by a man: for the Lord fought for Israel.¹

It is clear that a special connection exists between Joshua and the sun. Joshua retires in Timnath-serah, according to the text; the latter part of this place name is another word for ‘sun’ used by redactor/s to avoid using the Hebrew ‘heras’, which seems to have been related to traditions of astral worship that the redactor wanted to edit out.² (One can see ‘heras’ used in Judges 14:18, in a segment related to Samson – i.e., Hebrew: ‘shamson’, related to ‘shams’ or ‘sun’.)

Read again, the passage cited above suggests at first that Joshua is more powerful than the forces of the sun or moon. Was he a deity in an astral cosmology that also existed before or at the time of worship of Yahweh? Quickly, a voice loyal to Yahweh steps in to tell us (rather untruthfully, if one looks at other accounts in the Bible) that this encounter was *the only time* in history that God/Yahweh acted on the commandments of a human. In other words, while an ancient audience might have known of a tradition surrounding Joshua and the sun, here that reference is put to work in a powerful narrative defending new traditions about Yahweh.

In the spirit of this type of literary examination, this essay will briefly review literature indicating that Jerusalem was a center for astral worship in the ancient world. Here, we cannot speak of a physical city of Jerusalem, in the location it exists today. Instead, we are speaking of the word ‘Jerusalem’ and its synonyms as they appear in ancient texts.

One such ancient textual resource was the Ugaritic library found in Ras Shamra, Syria, believed to date to approximately 1200 BCE. These tablets detail the ‘Baal cycle’, or the belief system dominated by the god Baal that was prevalent at that time in the northern Levant. John Gray, in his 1949 discussion of the Ras Shamra text, “The Birth of the Gracious and Beautiful Gods,” posited that the personal names of the Solomon and his brother Absalom, as well as the name of Jerusalem, signaled that the biblical David and his city were at one time dedicated to the worship of the Ugaritic god Shalem.³ The text in question, KTU 1:23, describes how twins Shahar and Shalem were born from El and ‘Athtarte; Gray provides evidence that the brothers were paired expressions of the Venus star, the deity ‘Athtar. Since then, Gray’s ideas have been cited in numerous works,⁴ but with little further elaboration.

The Ugaritic cosmology was complex and in flux. Heiser refers to competition between the deities Baal and ‘Athtar which results in ‘Athtar’s subsequent loss of his throne and descent to rule the earth. He argues that this sequence of events was not a loss of status for ‘Athtar, but rather an affirmation of the strength of Baal.⁵ It is plausible, then, that a subsequent tradition developed about ‘Athtar’s reign on earth, expressed through the hypostasis Shalem (or ŠLM without vowels).⁶ Jerusalem was clearly linked to the tradition; perhaps Shalem’s temple was located in the settlement. Genesis 14:18, Hebrew 7:1 and 8 describe ‘Salem’ as the place where Melchizedek ruled; later Jewish texts written by Josephus and the Targum alternatively refer to this place as Jerusalem.⁷ Other local place names like Jericho (named after the moon god Yriach) and Beit-Yriach also reflect an astral cosmology.

Heiser goes on to attempt to link problematic sections of the biblical text to Ugaritic source material.⁸ He argues that Isaiah 14:12-15 (“How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn!...”) appears to tie Absalom to the rise and descent of ‘Athtar. Significantly, Absalom is the brother of Solomon, the builder of the temple in Jerusalem that becomes so important to the Israelites. It is surely not a coincidence that the names ‘Absalom’ and ‘Jerusalem’ share the same consonants in Hebrew, nor that ‘Solomon’ in Hebrew has near-identical pronunciation but for the first consonant. Such references hold meaning, despite the long periods of time that separate the various written texts.

Historians have generally agreed that the Deuteronomist history that relates the earliest account of Solomon was compiled no earlier than the late seventh century BCE and possibly even after the attested temple destruction and subsequent exile in 587/586.⁹

But fragments of a tradition can persist for thousands of years. Knauf uses the Masoretic text¹⁰ to propose that the Qedarites mentioned in the Song of Songs were Nabateans, a community crucial to the spice trade route from South Arabia in the third century BCE. “Black I am, but beautiful, ye daughters of Jerusalem / As tents of Qedar, as tentcloth of Salam black” reads the Song.¹¹ The tribe of Salam was located just south of the Nabateans, in Madain Salih. In the course of his presentation, Knauf mentions that the Masoretic text records this line as “tentcloths of Solomon.” He prefers the reading of ‘Salam’, which requires no change in consonants, but the Masoretic tradition shows the possibility of linking Solomon (ŠLMH in unvoweled Hebrew) with the worship of SLM in northeastern Arabia.

North Arabians worshipped (among other deities) the god SLM, whose name is related to the word for ‘image’ in South Arabic and Hebrew. (Again, ancient texts often appear without vowels, hence the names’ appearance here as groups of consonants.) Dalley discusses two stelae found in Teima, one which refers by name to the installation of the god SLM with the approval of SLM of MHRM, and the other a stone pedestal retrieved from Teima and inscribed with an Aramaic text recording an offering to “SLM of RB.”¹² Her rendering of the unvoweled SLM as ‘Salmu’ is generated vis-à-vis the Akkadian god Salmu mentioned in list AN=Anum, from mid-to late second millennium tablets, who was synonymous with the sun god Shamash. The same god name is found in a mid-Babylonian text from the Hittite capital Hatusas, and Dalley also refers to the Midianite king Salmunnu in the book of Judges. Her conclusion is that the god Salmu enters Mesopotamia in the first half of the second millennium, presumably as a Semitic but foreign deity.¹³ A god called Salmu-sarri is introduced as a legal witness on three late Assyrian legal documents (two from Tel Khalaf, which was biblical Gozan, and one from Nimrod, where he appears next to Shamash).¹⁴ Finally, SLM occurs in a Latin inscription from Dumat al-Jandal (‘sulmus’) which further suggests that his worship was not limited to Teima.¹⁵

Therefore, Salmu in North Arabia was believed to be the deity of the sun, and it is likely that ŠLM in Jerusalem was also a sun god. We know that a historical connection existed between Solomon and ŠLM through the Mesoratic text, which simultaneously refers to the north Arabian tribe of Salem where Salmu was worshipped.

One of the most obvious issues raised here in relating the Mesopotamian Salmu, Ugaritic god ŠLM, the biblical ŠLMH and finally North Arabian SLM is the orthographic problem posed by the transformation of originally South Arabian sibilants. South Arabian script in antiquity had three sibilants, while Ugaritic and Hebrew have only two. In addition, it appears that many of the earlier South Arabian texts available show signs of a language in transition; as a result there are a number of anomalies in correspondence.¹⁶ It is quite plausible, considering this transition phase and confusion about foreign spellings, that “S” (like Solomon) or “Š” (like Shaher)

could have traveled from South Arabia, and become a North Semitic “Š”, and at the same time be rendered in North Arabia as “S” (as in SLM) or even “S” (as in the tribe Salem).¹⁷ It is clear, however, that the most orthographically sound progression begins in South Arabia and from there extends into the Levant, and into North Arabia. One indication that the tradition could have passed from the Levant into North Arabia is the record stored in the Masoretic text where “S” is read as “Š”, and confusion is expressed between Salem and Solomon.

These relationships continue to echo today. In South Arabia, today’s Yemen, the sun deity was associated with oversight and protection and the moon deity with wisdom. Modern Arabic maintains this relationship in the word “Salaam,” which means “safety” and thus “peace.” The Quran says of Laylat al-Qadr [The Night of Power], when the new moon is sighted marking the end of Ramadan, “It is salvation [*salaam*] until the coming of the dawn.”

If the final Solomon compilation in the Hebrew Bible does reflect an earlier tradition, its editor (editors?) has greatly altered and embellished it to suit his purposes. As such the above description can only be used to establish that a cluster of elements of the Baal cycle are present in the Solomon narrative (which relates in turn to Jerusalem), as compared with other areas of the Deuteronomistic compilation.

For bible scholars, Gray’s argument that ancient Levantine kings worshipped the local god Shalem enriches rather than challenges ongoing literary scholarship on competition between Yahweh and the deity El within the biblical narrative. For historians, however, the position is more intriguing. The questions that it raises—at what point did any historical Solomon abandon his namesake, and construct the Temple of Yahweh, and why did the city of Jerusalem divorce its patron deity?—have not been explored. Likely those answers remain tied to the yet unresolved question of Solomon’s historicity.

Endnotes

¹ Joshua 10:12-14.

² “Timnath-Heres”, *New Bible Dictionary*, Third Edition, ed. I. Howard Marshall, Millard, Packer, and Wiseman (Leicester: Intervarsity Press, 1996), p. 1188.

³ John Gray, “The Desert God ATTR in the Literature and Religion of Canaan,” *Journal of Near-Eastern Studies*, Vol 8 No 2, April 1949 (University of Chicago Press), 72-83.

⁴ See for example, Michael S. Heiser, “The Mythological Provenance of Isa. XIV 12-15: A Reconsideration of the Ugaritic Material,” *VT* 51 (2001) 354-69 and Gosta W. Ahlstron, *The History*

of Ancient Palestine (Mineapolis, 1993), 504-5.

⁵ Mark S. Smith, “The God Athtar in the Ancient Near East and His Place in KTU 1.6 I,” *Solving Riddles and Untying Knots*, Eds. Ziony Zevitt, Seymour Gitin, Michael Sokoloff (Eisenbrauns, Indiana: 1995), 355.

⁶ Wiggins’ proposal that the biblical Absalom is modeled after Athtar due to his short reign is equally plausible. Steve A Wiggins, “Between Heaven and Earth: Absalom’s Dilemma,” *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 1: 23 (Nashotah House).

⁷ “Salem”, *New Bible Dictionary*, Third Edition, ed. I. Howard Marshall, Millard, Packer, and

Wiseman (Leicester: Intervarsity Press, 1996) and "Jerusalem", *Jewish Encyclopedia*, <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com>.

⁸ Heiser, 354-69.

⁹ Nadav Na'aman, "Sources and composition in the history of Solomon", *The Age of Solomon: Scholarship at the Turn of the Century*, ed. by Lowell K. Handy, (Brill: New York, 1997), 58.

¹⁰ The Hebrew text of the Jewish canon primarily copied, edited and distributed by a group of Jews known as the Masoretes between the seventh and tenth centuries CE. It has numerous differences compared to (extant 4th century) manuscripts of the Septuagint, a Greek translation (made in the 3rd to 2nd centuries BCE) of the Hebrew Scriptures. See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Masoretic_text

¹¹ Ernst Axel Knauf, "Nabatean Origins," *Arabian Studies in Honour of Mahmoud Ghul* (Symposium at Yarmouk University, Dec, 8-11, 1984, Vol. II.) 59-60.

¹² Stephanie Dalley, "Stelae from Teima and the God SLM (SALMU)," *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* Vol 15 (1985) 27-33.

¹³ Dalley, 28-29.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 29.

¹⁵ A. Livingstone, "Arabians in Babylonia/ Babylonians in Arabia: Some reflections a Propos New and Old Evidence," *L'Arabie Preislamique et son Environment Historique et Culturel* (Actes du Colloque de Strasbourg, 24-27 June 1987) 104.

¹⁶ See Dorothy Stehle, "Sibilants and emphatics in South Arabic," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol 60 No 4 (Dec. 1940) 507-543.

¹⁷ *Ibid*.