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Ancient Religions of the Fertile Crescent—and the Sanathana Dharma

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The Old Testament is the record of the progressive revelation of God. To a keen student of the Old Testament the fact of revelation is depicted in the historical accounts of the religions of Canaan, which trace their origin in the religions of Central Asia. The secular history of ancient Europe and Asia shows that the philosophical and cultural history of man was formed in the regions round about the valleys of Euphrates and Tigris. Recent excavations of the archaeologists support the claim of history and of the Biblical accounts. It is really astonishing to see the close similarities between the primitive religions of Canaan and the religions of Persia, India, Africa and Europe. Therefore, one is led on to study more closely the religions of the East, in the light of the facts revealed in the Bible. It ultimately leads one to a deeper and fuller understanding of the revelation of God through the history of man's civilization.

NOMADIC TRIBES OF CENTRAL ASIA

The chief clans and tribes of the world take their origin from the regions of Central Asia. We understand this in the light of the Flood story of the Bible. Parallels have been found in the mythological tales of Australia, India, Polynesia, Tibet and Lithuania. Are they mere legends? Or different versions of the same event? As the nations spread from their common origin the Flood story also followed them and later adopted circumstantial forms and patterns. The deluge that took place in the great rivers of Tigris and Euphrates covered the whole then known civilized world. The Bible also truly records the same event. (Gen. 7:19.)

Until 1921, O.T. scholars questioned the credibility of the Flood story. But Dr. Woolley and his companions began excavations at the ancient site of Ur, a railway station 120 miles north of Basra, near the Persian Gulf. For six years they struggled at Tell-el-Muqayyar, the Ur of the ancient world. Finally, they

reached a stratum of clay about 10 feet in depth. It was the layer of the deluge, they concluded, that covered the face of the civilized world in *circa* 4000 B.C. Soon after the deluge, life again sprang from the same region and began to spread over the space of the world. The Gilgamesh Epic has its deluge version with Utnapistim as the hero, whose counterpart we see in the Bible. As they scattered, cultural and philosophical development also followed. The following Biblical table of genealogy will show us the relation between the principal tribes:

NOAH

| <i>Shem</i> (Eastern) (Gen. 10: 22) | <i>Ham</i> (Southern) (Gen. 10: 6) | <i>Japheth</i> (Northern) (Gen. 10: 2) |
|--|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Elam (Elamites) Asshur (Assyrians) Arpachshad (Shela-Eber-Hebrews) Lud (Lydian) Aram (Syrians) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cush (Ethiopians) Mizraim (Egyptians— Dravidians) Put (an African tribe) Canaan (Canaanites) Zidon (Zidonians) Heth (Hittites) Jebusites Amorites Hivites (Horites— <i>Xoppaoui</i>—Hurrians— Aryans) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gomer (Gomorians) Magog (a Central Asian clan) Madai (Medes) Javan (Greeks) Tubal (North Palestinian) Meshech Tiras |

Mesopotamia (region between the Rivers) was the centre of the changing patterns of culture. The Noachic tribes were nomads and they wandered from one place to another. Ur, which can be interpreted as the place of origin, was the earliest city of civilization. In the last quarter of the third millennium B.C. the inhabitants of Ur moved from there to northern countries and to the West and to the East. They were generally known by the name 'Habirus' (wanderers). Abraham, the 'Son' (descendant) of Terah, was a chieftain of the Habirus. Excavations at Mari provide us with ample evidences to this fact. One of the Egyptian records bears the name 'Apiru' which, of course, denotes the Habirus. O.T. scholarship has agreed now to include Hebrews also in the Habiru groups but it hesitates to identify all Habirus as Hebrews. From the above table of genealogy it is clear that all the tribes after the deluge were of one stock. But the Hebrews are of the Semite race (Eastern) and the Canaanites, the Egyptians and the Hivites are of the Hamite race (Southern) and the Greeks and the Medes are of the Japhetite race (Northern).

CANAANITES

For our particular observation let us proceed with the Hamite race, the southern group. Egyptians belong to this line. It is generally assumed by the anthropologists, after due consideration and examination of Egyptian mummies and culture, that the Dravidians of South India take their origin from the Egyptians.

who in turn trace their ancestry from Central Asia. The Canaanites were a fraternal race of the Egyptians. The land of Canaan derived its name from the people who dwelt in the land. The Canaanites settled not only in Palestine but in other regions of the Mediterranean and of Central Asia. Before the arrival of the Semites, the Canaanite tribes, the Amorites and the Hittites, entered into Palestine. When Abraham, the Hebrew (Gen. 15:13), came into Canaan from Ur, he saw Canaanites dwelling in the land. The Prophet Ezekiel refers to the children of Israel by saying 'the Amorite was thy father, thy mother was an Hittite' (Ezek. 16:3).

HIVITES (Gen. 10:16)

Recent excavations of the archaeologists at Nuzu have thrown considerable light on the history and culture of the tribe called 'Hurrians'. It is their firm opinion that the Hivites of the Bible truly represent the Hurrians or the Horites. The word in Hebrew is probably a slip of a copyist. In the LXX this tribe is mentioned as 'Chorraioi' which in turn comes in English as Hurrians. The change of the consonant is due to the inability of the Greek language to transcribe the guttural of the Hebrew. The same transformation occurs when it is written in other languages also. Hugo Winckler, an eminent scholar, suggests that the Hurrians of the Nuzu tablets are the 'Aryans'. We can agree with him because the history and culture of the Hurrians revealed in the Hurrian text unearthed from Nuzu, the Horite city, bear witness to several customs, practices and names identical with those of the Aryans of India. The excavations at Tell-el-Amarna in 1887 also support this view. A letter written by a Canaanite chieftain to the Pharaoh of Egypt in Akkadian, which was the diplomatic language of that era, reads: 'To the king, my Lord, my Sun, my God, say: Thus (says) Suwardata, thy servant, the servant of the king and the dust under his feet, the ground on which thou dost tread: At the feet of the king, my Lord, the Sun of Heaven, seven times, seven times I prostrated myself, on my belly and on my back . . .' This is just the introduction of the letter. The matter of the same runs . . . 'the king, my Lord, should know that the Hapiru have risen in the lands which the God of the king, my Lord, has given me, and that I have beaten them, and the king, my Lord, should know that all my brothers have left me: and I and Abdu-Kheba alone are left to fight against the leader of the Hapiru. And Zurata, prince of Acco (Jud. 1:31), and Indaruta, prince of Achshaph (Josh. 11:1), were the ones who hastened to my help in return for 50 chariots of which I have now been deprived . . .' (p. 145, *Bible as History*, Keller).

The name of the author of this letter, Suwardata, prince of Hebron, clearly indicates his Indo-Aryan ancestry. Indaruta also belongs to the same descent. Keller refers also to the names of Biryawaza of Damascus, Biridiya of Megiddo, Widiya of Askelon and Birashehena of Shechem in Samaria. Very many

similar names are found in early Indian history. The king Abdu-keba was of Horrite origin.

Apart from the similarities in names, there are several philological and religious affinities between these two races. Groppe says, 'the Aryans of primitive times have been completely devoid of religion', and ascribes the uniformity of their myths and worship, almost in the same way as Creuzer, to the enormous number of religious forms that they borrowed from western Asia and Egypt and transferred to Greece, India, Middle and North Europe (p. 13, *Encyclop. of Rel. and Eth.*, Vol. II). According to Groppe, it is clear that the Aryans were a race who borrowed their religious pattern from western Asia and Egypt. The Horites, settled partly in Edom in the first quarter of the second millennium B.C., trace their origin from Mesopotamia. The Hurrians are referred to in the early records of the third dynasty of Ur (2070-1960 B.C.). They held both Syria and Assyria under subjection. The term Canaan finds its more satisfactory explanation when regarded as a Hurrian designation signifying 'belonging to the land of the purple'. The word 'Damascus' (Timashghi) also derived from the same source. The Hurrians were a conglomerate of several groups. All this suggests that these two sections were, in the beginning of their cultural growth, one race. The Sanskrit and Greek words like Gandarva—Kentauros, Maruths—maruts (Lat.), Varuna—ouranos, Manu—minos, Devatheos—deus support our arguments.

The discovery of an Egyptian papyrus (fifteenth century B.C.) reveals the name 'Khuru' for Canaan, after the name Hurri of the Bible (Jud. 3:3; Josh. 11:3). The names of the Hurrian texts indicate that at least the princely caste must be reckoned as Indo-Aryan. Queen Hatshepsut of Egypt writes in one of her annals that Asians had already been in her capital. Egyptians called South Palestine by the names 'Huru', 'Khari', 'Khuri', 'Khurli'. They were not first Semites but were semitized after their settlement, through brotherly kinship with the Semites. By the fifteenth century B.C. they settled in Ugarit. When the Hyksos began to invade Egypt, the Hebrews and the Horites joined with them. 'Two Egyptian words for chariots are borrowed from a Semitic and Hurrian root' (Prof. Speiser). All this suggests that the nomadic Habirus of Central Asia slowly began to wane in their influence on the regions throughout, in the second millennium B.C. The Central Asian tribes were known by the generic name 'Habirus' at first and later adopted different names signifying their fundamental ethnic unity, viz. Hurrians, Aryans, Horrites, Khru, Apiru, Hebrews, Arabs, Aurachim. Probably the name 'Aryan' is derived from the word Ur, the original place of their habitation.

RELIGION OF THE CANAANITES

To get a full picture of the religious practices of the Canaanites we have to go through the religious history of the pri-

mitive Noachic tribes. Apart from the Biblical records, archaeology is always at our disposal to provide us with materials. As we go through the customs and practices we come to the realization of the fact of the oneness of the Aryan religion with the Canaanite religion, from which the O.T. takes its shape as a fulfilment and a realization of the world religions, especially of the 'Sanathana Dharma' of Hindustan.

CANAANITE GODS

Among these tribes, 'El' was the supreme god. He held a high position among the gods. The form of the name was slightly changed and used among different nations, e.g. El (Heb.), El (Sam.), Elon (Phoen.), Illu (Assyr.), Allatu (goddess) and Elattu (goddess), Allah (god) (Aram., Arab.), Alele (Sansk., in the dialect of Pisachu). The Hebrew adopted the plural as well as the singular of the word to denote their moral god.

Baal was the chief god of fertility. He was known as Bel in Babylon. The polyandrous Istar became the wife of Baal under the name Astarte in Canaan. Most of the gods originated from mythology, which was the primitive form of philosophical speculation. The Ugaritic mythology strikes a happy medium between the Babylonian and Aegean. We find the names of Indian gods in a treaty between the Hittites and the Mittani. The Baal-epic of Ugarit depicts the goddess 'Anath'. 'With her might she mowed down the dwellers in the cities, she struck down the people of the sea-coasts, she destroyed the men of the East.' She drove men into her temple and closed the doors so that no one could escape. 'She hurled chairs at the youths, tables at the warriors, footstools at the mighty men. She waded up to the knees, up to the neck in blood. Human heads lay at her feet, human hands flew over her like locusts. She tied the heads of her victims as ornaments upon her back, their hands she tied upon her belt. Her liver was swollen with laughing, her heart was full of joy, the liver of Anath was full of exultation. When she was satisfied, she washed her hands in streams of human blood before turning again to other things' (p. 264, *Bible as History*, Keller). Indians who read this ancient epic of Ugarit will soon realize that the Anath of Ugarit was no one but the counterpart of 'Kālī' of India. Anath's image is engraved on stones as a naked goddess. The matriarchal system of the race was no doubt the reason for the origin of female gods in the primitive religions. They were naked and symbolized as the mother of all races.

Sacrifices were offered to these gods and goddesses. Children and virgins were offered. Similar human sacrifice has not been uncommon in the religion of India. To propitiate the gods, incense was burned, and wine and salt were offered before the idols upon high mountains. All the hills and mountains were regarded as sacred. In the Veda, we see references to the

offerings of Soma and Sura, two Indian sacred beverages, as equivalent to the wine of the nomadic religion.

A fertility cult was practised. Baal was the 'husband' of the land. He was procreator. The priests and temple women engaged in acts of immorality to symbolize and please the fertility gods and goddesses. The temples of the Aryan religion are no exception. Devadasis and sorcerer-priests are still to be seen at the gates of sacred temples, reminiscent of the 'Khodashim' of the ancient Aryan religion. In addition to this practice, phallic worship was also prevalent among some of the Canaanite tribes. The 'Ashera' images are, according to some scholars, symbols of fertility. They were usually found under green trees (Ezek. 16: 17; Jer. 17:2). The origin of the 'Linga worship' in India can certainly be found in the parallel customs of the ancient Hurrian race.

Sanctuaries, natural and artificial waters, trees, caves and stones were regarded as sacred and having divine power (e.g. Elon-Moreh-tree of revealer: Gen. 12:6). Some of the rivers in Syria were sacred and were called by the name 'Cadisha' (holy). Sidon and Kishon were holy rivers. Where shall we, Indians, go to find out the origins of the animistic religion, which we still find in the villages and hamlets, towns and cities under the banner of Sanathana Dharma, except to their original home in Central Asia? In India we have our Cadisha, sacred trees and stones. The worship of 'Nāga' also finds its parallel in the serpent worship of the nomads.

Reverence was also shown to domestic animals. They were regarded as friends and kinsmen. Agatharchides describes the Troglodytes nomads of E. Africa as those who hated the slaughter of domestic animals. 'Libyans usually ate flesh of the oxen, never of the cow' (Herodotus). In Egypt the cow was sacred to the 'Hathor-Isis' (cow goddess) and also among the Phoenicians. 'Cow-Mātā' is the Indian version of the old cow worship. In mount Sinai, the Hebrews observed the worship of the bull of Egypt, which was the symbol of fertility. Canaan also carried on bull worship. The images of the garlanded bulls are not a rare scene of our towns and villages, which to the Sanathanists are gods and friends of gods.

The Sun-god was venerated and worshipped throughout the Central Asian region. It was, no doubt, another version of fire worship. 'Shemesh' was the head of the Heliopolitan ennead of Egypt. The word 'Surya' is probably a combination of 'Shu' (Sun) and 'Arya' (pious). The nomadic tribes depended largely on natural powers for their existence and therefore worshipped them as gods. The Jebusites of Jerusalem venerated the Sun-god. The temple was built on a rock on the top of the hill where the rising Sun-god revealed himself. It was only in the exile that the sun-cult was finally eradicated from the temple (Ezek. 8:3, 16). The chamber of 'Purvah' (shining house) is an old reminiscence of the sun-cult. The religion of India, which

absorbs all the forms and customs of worship, adds the Sun-god also to its pantheon.

THE SOCIAL CUSTOMS AND LEGAL USAGES OF HURRIANS

About 20,000 tablets were unearthed from Nuzu which give us a mass of information. The Hurrians were the best known community of the ancient world. Three tablets depict a complete picture of the life of the nomads who lived in 1500 B.C. in the Central Asian region. Women held an honourable position in the community. The practice of adoption was exercised among them; they were nominal and real adoptions. For marriage the paying of 'Mohar' or 'Terkhatu' was the custom. In Nuzu the regular dowry was 40 shekels of silver which might even be paid in instalments. The purpose of marriage was nothing but procreation. If the wife fails to give children to her husband she must provide her maid to him so that they may have the desired issue. She must not send her away. The treatment of Sarah with Hagar was illegal according to Hurrian Law. Levirate marriage seems to have been practised. The custom was prevalent among the Aryans, too. The blessings of the Patriarch, the stealing of Laban's household gods and the selling of the birth-right of Esau find parallels in the Hurrian texts. To become a slave one should make a hole in the ear (Exod. 21:6). Among Hindus we can see the same customs.

The Old Testament was written by those who lived against this background. The Hurrians or the Aryans were only a small section of the vast sea of nomads. The contents of the Old Testament, therefore, were largely moulded and presented to the Hebrews as a guide to know the true God who acted in the history of other nations, who was revealed to other people in diverse manners and was worshipped by them in different forms. The Old Testament is thus an adequate record of the religious philosophy of mankind. The socio-religious customs and practices prevalent in the nomadic tribes are recorded one by one in the O.T. But their inadequacy to satisfy the religious quest of man is shown. Hence the Old Testament reveals to mankind the attempt of man in different centuries to satisfy spiritual thirst: and life lived in the early periods of history thus provides a background and venue for the ultimate and final act of redemption through the historical revelation.

Some Indian Christians think that the Old Testament is inadequate to meet the spiritual needs of India and to prepare a way for the revelation of Christ. They emphasize and advocate the use of Indian sacred scriptures to make the way open for the religion of Christ. A study of primitive religions in the light of the O.T. and with the help of the archaeologists enables us to see the futility of their arguments. The scriptures of India take their inspiration and origin from the nomadic religions of Central Asia, of which the Bible gives us a true picture. They cannot

supersede the importance or validity of the Old Testament with regard to its authenticity as a true and correct record of the primitive religions of the world. The Old Testament is therefore the only reliable record that can help the seeker in India to understand the earliest revelations of God through the ancient religions of the world.

The gradual and progressive revelation of God continued through the history of man's civilization which originated in Central Asia, and finally culminated in one of the tribes, viz. the Hebrews: and they belonged to the great Noachic race, from whom all the civilized nations take their descent. The anthropological and topographical study of these nomads leads us to the truth that the election of 'a People' as the people of God, by the El of all the nations, was in the redemptive plan of God for the whole world. The Jewish nation was a symbol of God's redemption and they were asked to be His witnesses to the entire world. God created man on the earth. They began to spread from the Fertile Crescent. God intervened in history in the same place. One of the races was called out to be His messenger, as His servant. When the servant failed to carry out the errand of the salvation of God, He Himself came down to preach the Kingdom of God, Repentance and Forgiveness. El is the God of all the nations. He is Iswar and Allah. He is the One who calls men to be reconciled with God through Jesus Christ, His Perfect manifestation on earth. His claim is universal, for the universe belongs to Him. The West and the East, the South and the North meet in Christ, find in Christ a synthesis of all philosophies and religions. Sanathana Dharma finds its perfection in Christ, for without Him it is only a philosophy of man. The Word became flesh to sum up everything, even the religions, in Christ.

'For the first time, three candidates are preparing for the M.Th. Degree in the History of Religions. The first candidate to attempt the degree in Old Testament sat for the examination in November after studying partly at Serampore and partly at Bangalore. And at this time, with eight registered candidates studying in various centres, we have evidence that the value of this course is really beginning to be appreciated.'

*(1959 Convocation Report of the President
of the Senate of Serampore College)*