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THE "MYTH OF ORIGINS", ARYAN AND HEBREW

A COMPARATIVE INTERPRETATION

The word "Myth" is used here as "primarily related to pre-history".¹ It also connotes that symbol of articulation of a pre-predicative experience man enjoyed and witnessed to in a community in a bygone age. This primordial encounter of a people with the Reality adopted "symbolization" and "articulation" in the process of its communication and transmission of heritage which contained the sum total of all that their forefathers actualized in their times by way of direct experience of the Reality in diverse ways and forms. Myth as "articulation" of the primordial experience of an ethnic group implies also a certain degree of "creativity" and not mere imitation of the naturalism of their forefathers. In this process of creative communication every "myth" indicates some aspect of the "Reality" beyond rationalization, exhibits certain deeper dimensions of truth beyond the shadow-plays of Nature, and evokes intuition on the *mysterion*, which is simultaneously "awe-inspiring and fascinating".

But "Mythology" as the science of critical study of the "myths" deals with the interpretation of the "various popular traditions and legendary tales current among a people and objects of general belief".² Our aim in this article will be to understand the "Myths of Origins" of the Aryan and Hebrew traditions from a comparative philosophical point of view. We shall certainly bear in mind in making this study that any myth has to be taken in

1. Maurice Wiles, "Myth in Theology": *The Myth of God Incarnate*, ed. by John Hick (London: SCM, 56—Bloomsbury St., 1977, 2nd imp.), p. 149.

2. Keightley, *Mythology of Ancient Greece and Italy*, 2nd ed. 1938, quoted by Maurice Wiles in his *art. cit.* and *op. cit.*, p. 149.

its "totality structure" respecting all its relatedness to human conditioning of culture and clime, language and symbols, poetry and figures, emotive modes and patterns of rationalization, peculiar to each community of peoples. Over and above these artistic motifs, the specific religious motifs or ethical motifs, if any, which sometimes form the backbone of the "general belief" of a people, will be of particular interest to us.

I The Aryan Versions of the "Myth of Origins"

(i)

In the beginning, to be sure, nothing existed: neither the heaven, nor the earth, nor space in between. So Non-being, having decided to be, became spirit and said: "Let me be!" He warmed himself further and from this heating was born fire. He warmed himself still further and from this heating was born light.³

Taittiriya Brāhmana II, 9, 1—2)

(ii)

Nāsatiya Sūkta

1. At first was neither Being nor Non-being.
There was not air nor yet sky beyond.
What was its wrapping Where? In whose protection?
Was Water there, unfathomable and deep?
2. There was no death then, nor yet deathlessness;
of night or day there was not any sign.
The One breathed without breath, by its own impulse.
Other than that was nothing else at all.
3. Darkness was there, all wrapped around by darkness,
all all was Water indiscriminate. Then
that which was hidden by the Void, that One, emerging,
stirring, through power of Ardour, came to be.

3. Text according to the Translation of Raimundo Panikkar, *The Vedic Experience* (London: Darton Longman & Todd, 1977), p. 49.

4. In the beginning Love arose,
which was the primal germ cell of the mind.
The Seers, searching in their hearts with wisdom,
discovered the connection of Being in Non-being.
 5. A crosswise line cut Being from Non-being.
What was described above it, what below?
Bearers of seed there were and mighty forces,
thrust from below and forward move above.
 6. Who really knows? Who can presume to tell it?
Whence was it born? Whence issued this creation?
Even the Gods came after its emergence.
Then who can tell from whence it came to be?
 7. That out of which creation has arisen,
whether it held it firm or it did not,
He who surveys it in the highest heaven,
He surely knows—or may be He does not!⁴
- (Rv X, 129)

(iii)

Tapas (Ardour)

(Creative force)

1. From blazing Ardour Cosmic Order came
and Truth; from thence was born the obscure night;
from thence the Ocean with its billowing waves.
2. From Ocean with its waves was born the year
which marshals the succession of nights and days,
controlling everything that blinks the eye.
3. Then, as before, did the creator fashion
the Sun and Moon, the Heaven and the Earth,
the atmosphere and the domain of light.⁵

(Rv X, 190)

4. *Ibid.*, p. 58.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

(iv)

*Laws of Creation**(Manusmṛti)*

- M I:5. This (cosmos) existed in the envelop of darkness, unperceived, destitute of distinctive marks, unattainable by reasoning, unknowable, wholly immersed, as it were, in deep sleep.
- M I:6. Then divine Self-existent (*Svayambhu*), indiscernible, but making (all) this, the great elements and the rest, discernible appeared with irresistible (creative) power dispelling the darkness.
- M I:8. He, desiring to produce beings of many kinds from his own body, first with a thought created the waters, and placed his seed in them.
- M I:9. That seed became a golden egg, (*Hiraṇyagarbha*), in brilliancy equal to the sun; in that (egg) he himself was born as Brahmā, the forefather (*pitāmaha*) of the whole world.
- M I:12. The divine one resided in that egg during a whole year, then he himself by his thought (alone) divided it into two halves.
- M I:13. And out of those two halves he formed heaven and earth, between them the middle sphere, the eight phases of the horizon, and the eternal abode of the waters.
- M I:24. Time and the divisions of time, the lunar mansions and the planets, the rivers, the oceans, the mountains, plains and uneven ground.
- M I:38. Lightnings, thunderbolts and clouds, imperfect and perfect rainbows, falling meteors, supernatural noises, comets and heavenly lights of many kinds.
- M I:41. Thus was this whole (creation) both the immovable and the movable, produced by those highminded ones by means of austerities (*tapas*) and at my request,⁶ (each being) according to (the results of) its actions.

6. Here Manu is speaking as the narrator of the "myth" as he is the progenitor of the men of one *Manvantara* (the human cycle initiated by one Manu).

- M I:50. The (various) conditions in this (cosmos), always terrible and constantly changing circle of births deaths to which created beings are subject, are stated to begin with Brahmā, and to end with these (just mentioned immovable creatures).
- M I:51. When he whose power is incomprehensible, had thus produced the universe and me (*ādi Manu*), he disappears in himself, repeatedly suppressing one period by means of the other.
- M I:96. Of created beings the most excellent are said to be those which are animated (*prāninah*); of the animat-ed, those which subsist by intelligence (*buddhijivinah*); of the intelligent, mankind (*narāh*); and of men, the brāhmanas (*brāhmanah*).
- M I:97. Of brāhmanas, those learned (in the Veda); of the learned, those who recognize (the necessity and the manner of performing the prescribed duties); of those who possess this knowledge, those who perform them; of the performers, those who know the Brahman.⁷

II *The Hebrew Version of the "Creation Myth"* (Genesis 1:1-2 1-4):

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth; Now the earth was a formless void, there was darkness over the deep, and God's spirit hovered over the water. God said, "let there be light", and there was light (Gn 1:1-2).

God saw that the light was good, and God divided light from darkness. God called light "day", and darkness he called "night". Evening came and morning came: the first day (3-5)

God said, "Let there be a vault in the waters to divide the waters in two". And so it was. God made the vault, and it divided the waters above the vault from the waters under the vault, God called the vault, "heaven". Evening came and morning came: second day (6-8).

God said, "Let the waters under heaven come together into a single mass, and let dry land appear". And so it was. God

7. Translation according to G. Buehler, *The Laws of Manu*, SBE XXV, rept., Motilal Banarsidass, Bungalow Road, Delhi—7, 1968.

called the dry land "earth" and the mass of waters "seas", and God saw that it was good. God said, "Let the earth produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants, and fruit trees bearing fruit with their seed inside, on the earth". And so it was. The earth produced vegetation: plants bearing seed in their several kinds, and trees bearing fruit with their seed inside in their several kinds. God saw that it was good. Evening came and morning came: the third day (9-13).

God said, "Let there be lights in the vault of heaven to divide day from night, and let them indicate festivals, days and years. Let them be lights in the vault of heaven to shine on the earth. And so it was. God made the two great lights: the greater light to govern the day, the smaller light to govern the night, and the stars. God set them in the vault of heaven to shine on the earth, to govern the day and the night and to divide light from darkness. God saw that it was good. Evening came and morning came: the fourth day (14-19).

God said, "Let the waters teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth within the vault of heaven". And so it was. God created great sea serpents and every kind of living creature with which the waters teem, and every kind of winged creature. God saw that it was good. God blessed them, saying, "Be fruitful, multiply, and fill the waters of the seas; and let the birds multiply upon the earth". Evening came and morning came: the fifth day (20-23).

God said, "Let the earth produce every kind of living creature: cattle, reptiles, and every kind of wild beast". And so it was. God made every kind of wild beast, every kind of cattle, and every kind of land reptile. God saw that it was good (24-25).

God said, "Let us make man in our image, in the likeness of ourselves, and let them be masters of the fish of the sea, and birds of heaven, the cattle, all the wild beasts and all the reptiles that crawl upon the earth."

God created man in the image of himself, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them (26-27).

God blessed them, saying to them, "Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and conquer it. Be masters of the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven and all living animals on the earth". God said, "See, I give you all the seed-bearing plants that are upon the whole earth, and all the trees with seed-bearing

fruit; this shall be your food. To all wild beasts, all birds of heaven and all living reptiles on the earth I give all the foliage of plants for food". And so it was. God saw all he had made, and indeed it was very good. Evening came and morning came: the sixth day (28-31).

Thus heaven and earth were completed with all their array. On the seventh day God completed the work he had been doing. He rested on the seventh day after all the work he had been doing. God blessed the seventh day and made it holy, because on that he had rested after all his work of creating. Such were the origins of heaven and earth when they were created (Gn 2:1-4).⁸

Fundamental philosophical implications

Our comparative interpretation of these two narratives of the "Myth of Origins" will be restricted to the fundamental philosophical implications, such as the meaning of the reality of everything, the relationship between the "existence and the non-existence", meaning of the historical in the non-historical, and the causality between the mystery and its manifestations.

One can discern very well a "philosophical setiology" in both the narratives even from the simple fact that the "Myth of Origins" expresses itself in two different styles employing the same realities of this already existing world to function as symbols for the communication of the primordial experience of two different communities. The "aetiological meditation" with which the sages or prophets of each tradition discovered the primal point of reference certainly leads us to transcend the frontiers of pure poetic experience. Hence the fundamental philosophical implications are simple corollaries flowing out of the intuitive reasoning which is pre-predicative in every system. Here the creation narratives are not mere myths of a fictitious kind but symbols capable of indicating the meaning of a hidden mystery which is apparently beyond the historical phase of the existential order of which the narrator himself is a part.

Reflecting seriously on the figures of the "Creation Myth" of the Aryan tradition as given above, one may rightly describe

8. Translation according to Jerusalem Bible (Standard edition).

it as a "holy pilgrimage" of the writer to the "further shore" of "being" in order to establish himself firmly on the "Ground of being". This search for the Ground, the "that One" of "these many", is an honest attempt to discover the relationship between the "existent and the non-existent"; it also gives the clue that the seers who had already meditated intuitively have discovered the "connection of Being in Non-being" (Rv X. 129,4). Hence Dr. Panikkar says:

What is fascinating about the experience of the Vedic seers is not only that they have dared to explore the outer space of being and existence, piercing the outskirts of reality, exploring the boundaries of the universe, describing being and its universal laws, but that they have also undertaken the risky and intriguing adventure of going beyond and piercing the being barrier so as to float in utter nothingness, so to speak, and discover that Non-being is only the outer atmosphere of Being, its protective veil. They plunge thus into a darkness enwrapped by darkness, into the Beyond from which there is no return, into that Prelude of Existence in which there is neither Being nor Non-being, neither God nor Gods, nor creature of any type; the traveller himself is volatilized, has disappeared. Creation is the act by which God, or whatever name we may choose to express the Ultimate, affirms himself not only vis-a-vis the world, thus created, but also vis-a-vis himself, for he certainly was neither creator before creation nor God for himself. The Vedic Seers make the staggering claim of entering into that enclosure where God is not yet God, where God is thus unknown to himself, and, not being creator, is "nothing". Without this perspective we may fail to grasp the Vedic message regarding the absolute Prelude to everything: *that One, tad ekam* (which is the less imperfect expression), or *this, idam* (which is the other way of saying it).⁹

It seems relevant to add a note to this inspiring reflection of Dr. Panikkar, that the uncertainty and insecurity felt by the Vedic seer on his pilgrimage to the "Beyond from which there is no return" has been almost overcome by Manu, the first patriarch and prophet of Vedic tribes, who added in his edition of the

9. R. Panikkar, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

“Myth of Origins” that man can halt at the harbour of the “further shore” and even pitch a camp there in the sanctuary of the Supreme Brahman who is the Ground, of the ocean of being, as well as the carrier of the pilgrim to the horizons beyond the waters. Hence the perfect man, the noblest of all men, is the one who realizes this “ground presence” of the Absolute (Brahman) (M I:97).

Once the Primal point is discovered by intuition the logic of inter-relationship between Being and beings, and beings among themselves, is easily discovered. This is certainly a return from “that One” to “these things” around us. So Manu states as follows in his laws of creation (which is a legalistic version of the “Creation Myth” of the Vedic Seer):

From that (first cause, which is indescernible eternal, and both real and unreal, was produced that Male Purusha who is famed in this world as Brahmā (M I:11).

From his Self (*atmanah*) he also drew forth the mind, which is both real unreal, likewise from the mind the ego, which possesses the function of self-consciousness and is lordly (M I:14).

Because of those six (kinds of) minute particles, which form the (creators) frame, enter (*ā-sri*) these (creatures), therefore the wise call his frame (*śarira*), the body (I:17).

Let everybody concentrating his mind, fully recognize in the self all things, both the real and the unreal, for he who recognizes the universe in the Self, *does not give his heart to unrighteousness* (M XII:118).

The ethical motif of the “Creation-Myth” is another philosophical implication which forms part of the intentionality of the “Myth-makers”. Manu as the moral instructor of the Vedic people points out this motivation of his redaction of the *nāsatiya sūkta* so to inspire the “pilgrim for improving his personal life in the light of the knowledge of the mystery of being. Knowledge does not make any sense unless it is transformative of the evil behavioural pattern of the knower. This provides a corrective to the apparent scepticism and agnosticism which *nāsatiya sūkta* gives rise to ultimately.

Now turning our spotlight on the Hebrew prophet who re-

dacted the "Myth of Origins" of the ancient Babylonians¹⁰ to help communicate the experience of faith of the people of Israel in the Omnipotence of God, Yahweh, the One without an equal, we may interpret the narrative as being the style of the language of a triumphant "exodus". It is an exodus with the solemn declaration that "God, the Yahweh, alone is the Omnipotent power behind everything that came into being." "In the beginning" i.e. when things began to exist, there was God first existing as the Absolute, who requires no explanation for his existence. This is part of the pre-predicative experience of the Hebrew believers. It is an act of faith in the absolute power of Yahweh over every power, celestial and terrestrial, that is basic to all other rationalization of the Myth of creation. So the "exodus" of the prophet is a committed and determined one which, he is sure to complete and come back to the source with the credit prize of collecting everything under one roof, the shelter of the eternal Absolute. For the Hebrew seer, the Primal principle is already there where He should be by reason of being the Omnipotent absolute. Hence the question of questioning the beginning of beginnings logically does not arise; rather its need is not logically felt by the Hebrew author. His meaning in the whole exodus along the valley of the Creation is achieved by being a "shareholder" in the "overlordship" of God over his creation, which by virtue of being created in the "likeness" and "image" of God, man has been enjoying from the beginning.

The symbols of Divine Supremacy and Absoluteness

The next allied philosophical concept is the idea of Absolute Power or Omnipotence that is presupposed as a primary requisite of "absolute creation." The narratives in both traditions indicate the need of such a supreme Power but employ two symbols apparently different but fundamentally signifying the same reality. These symbols are *tapas* (ardour) in the Vedic tradition and *dābār* (creative word) in the Hebrew tradition. The word, which is cap-

10. A comparative critical study of the Creation narratives of Gn I: 1ff with the Myth of *Enuma Elish* of the Babylonian culture reveals that the Genesis narrative of the Hebrew tradition is a deliberately constructed polemic against the Mesopotemian and Canaanite myths of creation. The Hebrew word *tehom* is etymologically related to the Akkadian *tiamat*

able of creating something from utter chaos, darkness, and formlessness, is a word which should have the highest power-potential. Such a Word of God is effective of its content from within the word itself, because it should be self-creative; it cannot have any other potential than creativity. Such a word is the verb *bārā* in the Hebrew language; this verb always appears in the Old Testament with God alone as its subject. It has the exclusive denotation of "bringing into existence something totally as the work of God's power". So "*bārā*" is the *dābār* (the power-word) for creation in the Hebrew myth of creation. In the Hebrew history of salvation and liberation, when *bārā* is used it always meant the production of something that is essentially new in virtue of sovereign exercise of the power of God. "Given the author's purpose and context, it is not at all extraordinary that he should have used this word to signify the coming into being of *all things* as the work of God's power".¹¹ In *Genesis* the act of creation is not a mechanical performance by God but it is the manifestation of the survival of Yahweh's over the "forces of chaos" (*tōhu wa-bōhu*). It is the display of Supreme Power, namely, calling into existence out of "nothing" in a very true sense. Now a question may be asked: What is behind the "Word-potential" of the creative power of God? The answer is given by the Vedic seer in his employment of the symbol *tapas*, which in the Sanskrit philology is rendered as "ardour", primordial cosmic heat, ascetic fire, austere penance, "concentration", which according to Dr. Panikkar "amounts to an ontic condensation".¹²

There is an intimate analogy between "Creation" by uttering the very "word of creation", i.e. *yehi* ("let there be") and its creative power-potential called *tapas* ("condensed" heat), which is one of the primordial symbols, so universally understood, of tremendous energy which is absolutely necessary for effecting what is "desired" by the creator when he utters, "let there be" (light). Even physically interpreted, light is the resultant of the intensification of heat. So the creation of light by a simple utterance of expressing the desire to have light implies the storage of its heat energy in the Subject himself, and in the case of creation,

11. Cf. *A New Catholic Commentary of Holy Scriptures*, Nelson, 1969, p. 174 (148 g); cf. also *Jerom Biblical Commentary*, Vol. I, p. 10 (16); also *International Critical Commentary: Genesis*, 2nd imp. 1963, p. 14.

12. R. Panikkar, *op. cit.*, p. 59

in God himself. The insight of the Vedic Seer is so realistic that his symbol contains the reality in its naked naturalism:

So Non-being, having decided to be, (self-creative) became spirit and said: "Let me be!" He warmed himself further and from this heating was born fire. He warmed himself still further and from this heating was born light. (Vide supra, Taitt, Br II, 2, 9, 2)

From blazing ardour Cosmic Order came and Truth; from thence was born the obscure night; from thence the Ocean with its billowing waves. (Vide supra, Rv X, 190)

Tapas (ardour) is said to bring about *rta* (order) and *satya* (truth).

The first result of the protocosmic energy (*tapas*) is said to be the double principle underlying the whole of reality: on the one hand, order (the structure, the formal principle, the contexture of reality); and on the other, truth (the contents, the substance, the material principle, the concrete and crystalized reality itself). Because of *rta* this world is not a chaos, but a cosmos, not an anarchic mass, but an ordered and harmonious whole. On account of *satya*, the world is not a haphazard place, an irresponsible game, or an inconsistent and purely fluid appearance. *Satya* is not primarily an epistemic truth but an ontic truthfulness, an ontological fullness having content, weight, and reality, namely, being.¹³

This is true also of the "Creation-myth" of Genesis. It is only after first bringing light into this world that proper order in the chaotic situation of the primeval times was established and, subsequently the truth about the ontological subordination of lower beings to higher beings has been once for all settled: to this rule finally man himself is brought to the subjection of God, and apt the same time as master of the creation in the "likeness" of God. Thus the "mystery" of creation is one and the same for both the Hebrews and the Aryans: But the "myth" that represents the Mystery receives different "articulations", because the "artists" are different and different "intuitions" are possible not just theoretically possible, but already embedded in the mythologies of different histories of culture, thus giving rise for a fascinating phenomenon of Comparative Mythology.

13. *Ibidem*