

Section 7 – the Emerging Patriarchy

Ishtar's Descent

Whereas Inanna was in control of her descent into the Underworld and rebirth into life, Ishtar is constrained.

As Ishtar's consort, Tammuz is a metaphor for the passage of time in the agricultural year. One myth, largely derived from Inanna's Descent into the Underworld, but much modified, says that in the burning heat of summer, during the month to which he gave his name, and which still bears it in the Jewish calendar, people came to the fields where Tammuz stood and savagely cut him down with sickles and scythes, scattering his flesh in many places. This represents the harvest of the grain crops, a critical moment in the agricultural year. Ishtar is distraught when she hears of his disappearance and wears herself out with grief. For months, she searches and she and the world pine for the lost lover Tammuz. She was the goddess of fertility so during her distress all procreation ceased. Trees and plants withered and died, and humans and animals became sterile.

Having searched everywhere else, Ishtar knew Tammuz must be in the Underworld. To enter the Underworld is to die, even for a deity, yet she does not hesitate. Ishtar descends into the Underworld and, after three days, returns with Tammuz, who is born again into this world. Tammuz' birthday is three days after the winter solstice; his return to glory is on the spring equinox, and he is cut down three days after the summer solstice with the crops ripe in the fields.

These three dates are still celebrated, and there is no doubt of their origin: the 25th of December, three days after the solstice, is the day that Tammuz, as weak as a baby, begins his return; Easter, the spring equinox, is when he rises into the world in his majesty and is wed to his beautiful Bride, the Queen of Heaven, the Goddess; and three days after the summer solstice he is cut down again and the cycle continues.

In this version, instead of a 'year' Goddess and a 'seasonal' consort, the cycle all revolves around the male, Tammuz. Ishtar's role is to rescue him and bring about his resurrection. In the Sumerian tale of Inanna, Dumuzi is sent to the Underworld after Inanna has been resurrected, by Inanna herself. The entire focus of the earlier myth is on the Goddess, in the form of Inanna and her annual resurrection, while in the latter, the Goddess is merely the protector and saviour of the deity. In the Sumerian myth, the Goddess is in absolute control, albeit in later versions

requiring the aid of Enki. In the Akkadian she has become the God-King's bodyguard and it is axiomatic that in any such relationship the bodyguard is less important than the guarded. We will see this again and again.

As ever with oral traditions, the story evolved. In some versions, Ishtar and Tammuz were born together in embrace, adapting the earlier story of An and Ki into their own, and in others, Ishtar herself gave birth to the baby Tammuz. Thus, when Tammuz came back into the world, it was not as a man, but as a baby contained within Ishtar's womb. Therefore, Tammuz is Ishtar's husband, and also her brother and son; a neat expression of the triple aspects of a deity. Nevertheless, the focus is always on Tammuz.

In another version of the tale, Tammuz was killed either by anonymous 'people' with scythes and sickles, or by a wild boar, a symbol of untamed chaos. Ishtar covered her head in ashes for forty days, giving up all pleasure and food.¹ She then discovered that she was pregnant. She says that this must be a divine conception (recalling the divine parthenogenesis of Ki and An within the womb of Nammu), and has a golden egg made to celebrate the event. She searches all over the world and again finds Tammuz in the Underworld, where she rescues him. Tammuz is resurrected in all his glory, and summer and fertility return. This particular version persisted into Babylonian times, when Ishtar had transformed into the goddess Shammuramat, perhaps better known by her Greek name, Semiramis.²

In yet other tellings, Ishtar (sometimes Shammuramat) herself is born from a bloodstained egg that lands in the Euphrates at sunrise. While, predictably, patriarchal monotheists have invented many gruesome tales about this, the real explanation is simple. The egg represents the holy womb of the Divine Mother and the blood her menstrual flow. Seas and rivers represent the creative waters of the Goddess, in which all life was formed, and the tale, by placing the egg in the river, restates that the power of creation and re-creation of everything, including herself, is reserved to the Goddess.

There are differences between the stories of Inanna and Ishtar, partly due to the ongoing effect of oral tradition but mainly to the great socio-political changes that were under way. Nonetheless, there are important commonalities. At either the Vernal Equinox or the first full moon after it, Tammuz rises into glory accompanied by his consort/wife Ishtar. The Sacred Marriage took place all over Mesopotamia during this festival, uniting Inanna/Ishtar with Dumuzi/Tammuz. This was the most important celebration of the year, now a formal marriage between the King and the High Priestess. It is the foundation of the traditional May Day celebrations which persist in the

¹ A tradition which Christians still follow, calling it Lent, as do Muslims, as Ramadan.

² This goddess has been identified with a real historical figure, the Assyrian Queen Shammuramat, but some scholars dispute this. The historical figure may simply have adopted the name of the goddess.

West to this day, where young men and women dance around symbolic trees – Maypoles – in fertility dances.³

Tammuz dies and rises again every year, just as the sun appears to.⁴ Even here, when we know that the patriarchy was already deeply entrenched, the deity cannot rise without the Goddess' intervention. She must resurrect him, for she is the Goddess, who both takes and gives life.

Changes in mythology follow changes in culture, as a means to explain and enforce them. Although this was now a patriarchal culture, the prevailing mythology was still strongly Goddess-based.

This would change.

³ Maypoles are often seen as phallus symbols that impregnate the Earth, ensuring a bountiful growing season.

⁴ The sun is not being worshipped here. It is simply a measure of the passage of time.