

Section 9 – Patriarchal Monotheism

Obedience and Redemption

Redemption, intimately familiar to anyone raised in a Christian cultural tradition, has a very particular meaning in Hebrew Scripture. Judaism is concerned principally with life on Earth.¹ Redemption in Judaism is the return of the people to the Promised Land, Israel, and the banishment of their oppressors. It has the same sense as ‘to redeem’ a slave – to buy that person’s freedom. Redemption, put simply, is not a matter for the afterlife, but something to be striven for in this life, and that redemption was seen as a free Jewish people in a sovereign Israel.

In the earliest traditions, the Creatrix is the Goddess, but in the Bible’s creation story this role is assumed by Jahweh. While no fault or blame is suggested in the earlier creation stories, the Hebrew tale contains the idea of ‘original sin’, and that sin is disobedience.² Disobedience is addressed in multiple symbolic ways in the creation myth found in the book of Genesis.

In the first version of the creation story, Genesis 1:26-28, Jahweh created a couple, Adam and his wife, but this first wife disappears in unexplained circumstances. In a non-Biblical Jewish tradition, she was called Lilith. This tale first developed in the Babylonian Talmud but was expanded in Jewish folklore. Lilith refused to obey Adam, claiming that, having been made of the same clay at the same time, she was not subservient to him.³ She was banished from the Garden of Eden, and she became a demon.

There is a link between Lilith and the lilitu demon who infests Inanna’s Huluppu Tree. This is supported by the fact that the tradition first appears during the Babylonian Captivity, when the scribes were exposed to Mesopotamian culture. Lilith, after her banishment, was believed to procreate demonic offspring endlessly and spread chaos whenever she could, causing wine to turn into vinegar, men to be impotent, women to be barren and babies to die.⁴ In the second version of the creation story, Genesis 2: 21-23, Eve is created from one of Adam’s ribs, thus removing any idea that they are equals. As far as this version is concerned, it is clear that Eve was

¹ It is possible that the very indifference Judaism shows towards Resurrection, that other great pillar of Christianity, is because this is so intrinsically associated with the Goddess.

² The Scriptural text is quite clear on this point. Many people think that the original sin was sex, but this derives from a very skewed interpretation by Saint Augustine, of whom Seán Fagan wrote: ‘St. Augustine, one of the most distinguished theologians in the history of the Church... had no real understanding of marriage but only his own guilt-ridden experience of long years of sinful fornication. John Noonan describes him as holding that there was nothing rational, spiritual or sacramental in the act of intercourse. He saw it as intimately linked to original sin,’ (<http://www.churchauthority.org/resources1/fagan5.asp>).

³ This is a reference to the way the lesser Sumerian deities created humanity from the clay of the land, in order to do the work.

⁴ Schwartz, Howard. *Lilith’s Cave: Jewish tales of the supernatural*. Harper & Row. 1988.

created for the pleasure of Adam, since after his first wife disappeared, his 'companions' had been wild beasts. This implies a parallel with Mesopotamian literature, in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Gilgamesh sends a priestess of Inanna, Shamhat, to tame the wild man Enkidu, who lives and mates with the wild beasts in Eden, which was the Sumerian name for the uncultivated grassland.

Shamhat teaches Enkidu how to be a civilised man, in everything from how to eat, how to behave, what clothes to wear and how to have sex with a woman. Shamhat represents the Goddess, and one of the great symbols of Goddess-power is the Fruit of the Tree of Knowledge.

The Fruit is a powerful Goddess object, which is confirmed by its shape, that of the womb, and its contents, the seed from which life springs. Thus, the fruit is a metaphor for not just the womb, but the Goddess and the power of creation. A symbol of regeneration, it also confers the knowledge of good and evil, the power to govern fairly and administer justice wisely. This is what Aset gave to Osiris to allow him to be a good king. But in the Jahwist view, the power to rule resides with Jahweh, not the Goddess. So the story insists that people must deny the Fruit, in order to remain loyal to Jahweh: in other words, the Goddess must be denied in favour of a male God. Eating the Fruit of the Tree of Knowledge might have inspired Adam to eat the Fruit of the Tree of Life, and become immortal. Expulsion from the Garden denies Adam the opportunity to do this and so become divine and set himself up in opposition to Jahweh. So it may again reflect the theological tension between El and Ba'al which is at the heart of the Hebrew Scripture. Jahweh was incensed that Adam had eaten the Fruit of the Tree of Knowledge because he feared he might use this knowledge to make himself an immortal god, and challenge his creator.⁵

The scribes writing Hebrew Scripture were social conservatives who had taken the side of El against the insurrection led by his son, Ba'al. Obedience of sons to their fathers is perhaps the most important underlying thread in the whole of Hebrew Scripture, so it was necessary for Jahweh to punish any filial disobedience; because of this, Adam is banished from Eden.⁶ This is itself a metaphor, since the Garden of Eden can be read as the Promised Land, Israel, which the Judahite clergy and kings so coveted. So it is saying that only kings who are true to Jahweh may rule, and those who transgress will lose everything.

⁵ Genesis 3:22-23. 'And the Lord God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever: therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden.' (KJV)

⁶ Hebrew Scripture is firm on the point of filial obedience: 'If a man have a stubborn and rebellious son, which will not obey the voice of his father, or the voice of his mother, and that, when they have chastened him, will not hearken unto them: Then shall his father and his mother lay hold on him, and bring him out unto the elders of his city, and unto the gate of his place; And they shall say unto the elders of his city, This our son is stubborn and rebellious, he will not obey our voice; he is a glutton, and a drunkard. And all the men of his city shall stone him with stones, that he die: so shalt thou put evil away from among you; and all Israel shall hear, and fear.' Deuteronomy 21:18-21 (KJV)

Satan is a complex character in Hebrew Scripture, because it is a syncretisation of Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Persian and other sources. However, in this example, Satan, as the serpent who gives Eve the Fruit, is derived directly from the Sumerian Enki. Enki was known to appear as a snake and throughout western mythology he and his successors have been the closest of all male deities to the Goddess. Enki gave the Mes, the gifts of civilisation, to Inanna, and these are equivalent to the Fruit of the Tree of Knowledge.

The Garden of Eden is a metaphor for Israel, and Adam and Eve the Judahite people; they are thrown out for disobeying Jahweh. Redemption, therefore, in Hebrew Scripture, is the possession of the land of Israel, and the freedom to live there in peace. It can only be achieved by absolute obedience to the word of El/Jahweh, as expressed in Scripture – in other words, obedience to the priests who wrote it.

Like the Adam and Eve story, the Egyptian Exile narrative serves to emphasise that obedience to Jahweh and his laws will be rewarded by return to the Promised Land, and disobedience by banishment. The fact that the Biblical Exile in Egypt is a myth does not mean that all the exiles also were. The Exile to Babylon, when the Hebrew Scriptures were heavily redacted and rewritten, was real. It only affected a relatively small percentage of the population, but these were the educated and skilled, the wealthy elite, including the scribes who were doing the writing.⁷

⁷ Finkelstein and Silberman 2002.