

A DICTIONARY OF WORLD MYTHOLOGY

ARTHUR COTTERELL

NEW EDITION
REVISED AND EXPANDED

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INTRODUCTION

The Meaning of Myth

'I am Nature,' declared the great goddess, 'the universal Mother, mistress of all the elements, primordial child of time, sovereign of all things spiritual, queen of the dead, queen also of the immortals, the single manifestation of all gods and goddesses that are. My nod governs the shining heights of Heaven, the wholesome sea-breezes, the lamentable silences of the world below. Though I am worshipped in many aspects, known by countless names, and propitiated with all manner of different rites, yet the whole round earth venerates me.' In these terms Isis reveals herself to Lucius Apuleius, her devotee, at the end of the ordeal described allegorically in his novel, *The Golden Ass*, which was written during the second century. Her pity was aroused and she had come to his aid, just as she might intervene on behalf of those who gave her worship in Phrygia, Greece, Ethiopia, or the Orient. It was insignificant that only 'the Egyptians, who excel in all kind of ancient learning . . . call me by my correct name, Queen Isis'.

The great goddess claimed to be universal. The truth of her revelation was the same for each and all, everywhere. No matter the specific form it might take at Pessinus or Eleusis, the recipient was afforded a glimpse in unspeakable intimacy into hidden depths. The agony of the quest had been superseded by the joy of vision. This notion of striking disclosure, as expressed here in the doctrine of a Greco-Roman mystery religion, can well stand as a description of the supreme quality of myth. For the greatest mythical tales make a direct appeal to the unconscious; they work through intuition. Their power is the flash of insight that illuminates the narrowness of matter-of-fact explanation and compels the intellect to acknowledge the need for a more adequate understanding. Myths possess an intensity of meaning that is akin to poetry.

The Origin of Myths

Recent interest in mythology indicates a general recognition of the power of these poetical tales. But there is still a fair measure of disagreement as to what is the strength of myths. For Plato, the first known user of the term, *mythologia* meant no more than the telling of stories which usually contained legendary figures. The main characters were not always gods, since the Greeks had an impressive number of heroes: Heracles, Jason, and Theseus, to name the most famous. Heracles may have undertaken

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his twelve labours because of goddess Hera's animosity, but his super-human exploits fall short of true divinity. He remains the archetype of the indomitable man. Moreover, the theory that myths derived from rituals, which is the corollary of the idea that myths are about gods, is open to question even in West Asian tradition, the main source of the supposed evidence. Gilgamesh, the semi-divine king of the Babylonian epic, is obsessed with his own mortality. Like Heracles, the son of a deity and a mortal, he was certainly treated for the most part as a man and not a god.

Another theory of origin is that folklore and mythology are almost indistinguishable. An Eskimo said: 'Our tales are men's experiences, and the things one hears of are not always lovely things. . . . When I narrate legends, it is not I who speak, it is the wisdom of our forefathers, speaking through me.' Myths are seen there as popular tales reworked by poets so as to absorb elements of religious belief. Yet it would be surprising if a sacred legend contained no features drawn from life; the annoyance of the Babylonian gods at the noise made by men 'below stairs' was even cited as the cause of the flood. Although the inhabitants of heaven were pleased that mankind had relieved them of the burden of work, they could not endure the noise and din. So they sent cosmic disaster in the form of water. The difference between a folktale and a myth lies in such an emphasis on the supernatural: it also reflects a preoccupation with the ultimate problems of existence, as opposed to an interest in narrative. The antithesis is Coyote, the trickster-god of North American Indian mythology, and his European cousin of medieval folklore, Reynard the Fox.

Experience of life among the Trobriand islanders of Melanesia led Bronislaw Malinowski (1884-1942) to the view that myth was neither primarily symbolic nor aetiological. He wrote: 'The myth in a primitive society, that is in its original living form, is not a mere tale told but a reality lived . . . the assertion of an original, greater, more important reality through which the present life, fate and work of mankind are governed' It was the recognition of the link between past and present established by myth in daily life. It was also a rejection of the absolute argument of the psychoanalysts, who contended that the creative images within the psyche were to be attributed to sexual repression. Sigmund Freud's (1856-1939) theory of the Oedipus complex as the 'primordial source . . . the *fons et origo* of everything', wrote Malinowski, 'I cannot conceive of . . . as the unique source of culture, of organization and belief.' Carl Jung (1876-1961), the other colossus of psychoanalysis, broke with Freud over this theory, too. He became convinced that the individual possessed both a personal unconscious and a collective unconscious; the former was filled with material peculiar to the individual, whereas the latter housed the common mental inheritance

of mankind—the archetypes, or primordial images, which ‘bring into our ephemeral consciousness an unknown psychic life belonging to a remote past. This psychic life’, Jung suggested, ‘is the mind of our ancient ancestors, the way in which they conceived of life and the world, of gods and human beings.’

The Problem of Prehistory

If we accept Jung’s theory, then the fantasies of the collective unconscious stem from the actual experiences of our remote ancestors, the men who lived at least a million years ago, and the development of prehistory as a serious field of study is of considerable importance to the mythologer; but there are real dangers of projecting on to the sparse data available the ideas we have formed from known mythologies. Certain facts exist. The precursor of the mother goddess in West Asia and Europe was surely the incarnation of fertility represented by the so-called ‘Venus’ figurines. These statuettes often show a woman with ballooning breasts, thighs, and buttocks. Their import is plain: the overriding need of a primitive band of hunters and food-gatherers for the repeated fertility of its women. Prehistoric rock-painting gives us another figure, the animal-master. The antlered spirit or sorcerer of the hunt appears on the walls of caves, just as in the ceremonies of present-day aboriginals in Australia his horned counterpart enacts the tribal myths of ‘dream time’, the remote period in which the ancestral spirits walked the earth. Lacking in prehistoric art, however, is the emphasis on human sacrifice found in early agricultural societies. The primitive hunters do not seem to have identified human destiny with the vegetable cycle of growth, maturity, decay, death, and resurrection.

No doubt the creative period of myth is set in prehistoric times. But in the civilizations of the first planters—the cities of the Nile, the Euphrates-Tigris valley, and the Indus—there evolved mythologies connected with a priesthood. The Sumerians even looked upon themselves as the property of their gods; they were workers on the divine estate. Here the earliest myths known today were shaped and recorded. Only in the living tradition of Indian mythology can we trace a direct link with this formulative time, since the displacement of the Vedic deities worshipped by the Aryan invaders may have been caused by the resurgence of older beliefs dating from the Indus valley civilization.

The Great Traditions

In the arrangement of this book can be discerned the seven great traditions of world mythology: namely, West Asia, South and Central Asia, East Asia, Europe, America, Africa, and Oceania. Within each of

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these traditions exist distinct and outstanding mythologies and myths—in West Asia there is Sumerian cosmology and *The Gilgamesh Epic*; in Europe the Greek myths and the cult of Odin; in Oceania Polynesian mythology and the exploits of Maui—but for historical and geographical reasons there is also a degree of internal coherence that can often be ascribed to mutual influence. The impact of Zoroastrian duality on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam is a case in point. However, two traditions have been particularly seminal: West Asia had a profound influence on Europe, while South and Central Asia penetrated East Asia by means of the Hindu and Buddhist faiths.

In the contemporary situation of India it is possible to appreciate the value of an analogical way of knowing. As Heinrich Zimmer perceptively remarked: 'By an eloquence rather of incident than of word, the mythology of India serves its function as the popular vehicle of the esoteric wisdom of yoga experience and of orthodox religion. An immediate effect is assured, because the tales are not the products of individual experiences and reactions. They are produced, treasured, and controlled by the collective working and thinking of the religious community. They thrive on the ever-renewed assent of successive generations. They are re-fashioned, re-shaped, laden with new meaning, through an anonymous creative process and a collective, intuitive acceptance. They are effective primarily on a subconscious level, touching intuition, feeling, and imagination. Their details impress themselves on the memory, soak down, and shape the deeper stratifications of the psyche. When brooded upon, their significant episodes are capable of revealing various shades of meaning, according to the experiences and life-needs of the individual.'

A fundamental divergence in attitude towards time between Hindu thought and ourselves is evident in the notion of renewable myth. Whereas the Westerner adheres to a linear view of time, with events conceived of as unique phenomena, the Hindu holds that the history of the universe is a natural process in which everything recurs in periodic circles. A far off termination is expected, but this passing away of creation is an astronomical number of years away. Most extreme in their sense of timelessness are the Jains, whose ancient Indian belief has room for neither the creation nor the destruction of the universe. The Greeks, of course, shared the notion of cyclic time, though never on the vast scale of India.

It might be argued that the spaciousness of the Hindu mind is best suited to the development of mythology. Certainly for sheer bulk, India scores high: alone, the epic *Mahabharata* runs to 100,000 verses. Yet there must always arise individuals with poetic gifts capable of enhancing myths, and to their inspiration we probably owe the fullest expression of mythical themes. Like the trickster hero Maui fishing up islands from the depths of the Pacific Ocean, these poets in a 'fine frenzy' would have

dangled their own hooks into the creative recesses of the unconscious, where Jung said the archetypes repose. We know that drugs were used to stimulate the visionary faculty and arouse visions which had earlier been obtained unaided. In the history of mythology the use of stimulants usually occurs when the simpler methods no longer suffice. Among the North American Indian tribes fasting gave way to peyotl.

Modern Myths

Around historical figures legends have often collected. Where the accretion has been of an intense character, like the tales of the Trojan War, the legendary people were absorbed into the archetypal forms of myth. Odysseus became the endless wayfarer, a dangerous captain to serve. Prophets were soon endowed with miraculous associations. The founder of Sikhism, Nanak Chand (1469–1538), was the marvellous boy who consorted with holy men and angels. He was carried by the latter to the supreme being in order to receive his mission on earth: the proclamation of the unity of god. But the life of this reasonable reformer has nothing of the mythical power enjoyed by the antagonist of St Peter, Simon Magus. Only the earnest prayer of the great evangelist was enough to persuade the Lord to cut short the flying display of the Canaanite sorcerer above the temples of Rome and let Simon fall to the ground so as to 'break his leg in three places'.

This age-old tendency to invest important persons with mythical significance is by no means dead in the modern world. It is interesting to note the so-called 'cult of the individual' in Communist countries. The destruction of Stalin's statue in the Hungarian Uprising of 1956 was a symbolic act; the enraged people of Budapest were rebelling against the archetype of the tyrannical father. In an opposite direction the sorrow felt at the assassination of President Kennedy seven years later passed beyond a sense of either political or personal loss. Perhaps the cultural-founder hero of a brave new world had disappeared. Mass media of course plays a crucial role in the propagation of legendary events. It exalts and lays low. Yet the images of its own creation are singularly weak: there is a synthetic quality about Superman. Where an individual pop star or an entertainer achieves recognition, the audience is often most conscious of the evanescence of such a career. They pass like comets across an electronic sky. Roland Barthes has pointed out the 'what-goes-without-saying' aspects of modern spectacles, whether it is the alchemical quality of plastic, the cult of foam in detergents, or the mask of the cinema heroine, but this study of contemporary signs is rather an investigation of ritual than of myth. In industrial societies the mythical faculty is almost a thing of the past. This book represents an attempt to recover what our ancestors have rated so highly and what some psychoanalysts argue may

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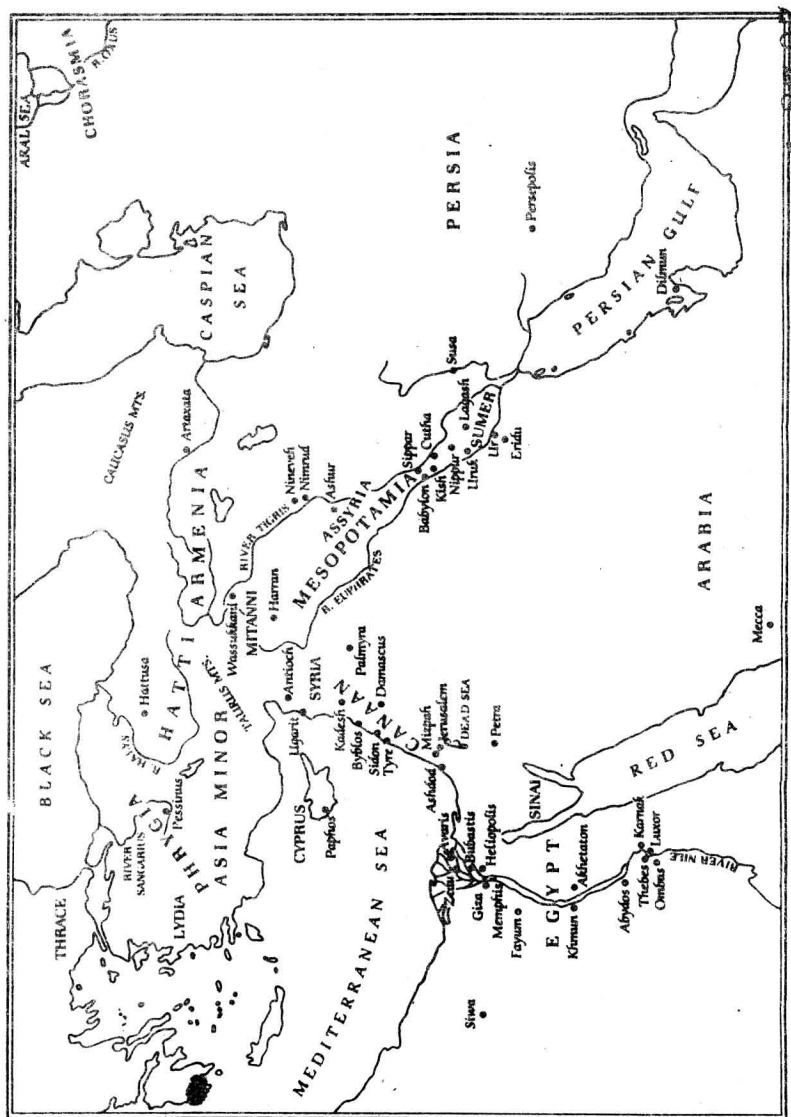
still be within the unconscious. Even now, as Professor Kerényi has put it: 'Mythology, like the severed head of Orpheus, goes on singing even in death and from afar.'

WEST ASIA

Egypt Sumer Babylon Canaan Asia Minor
Persia Arabia

The antiquity of Egypt deeply impressed the Ancient World. Visitors to the immense temple of Karnak did not need to calculate the country's past from the number of statues there of high priests, though the Greek traveller and historian Herodotus used this method in the fifth century BC. They could observe everywhere the relics of a once mighty empire — colossal statues, temples, shrines, tombs, pyramids, and cities. They could also sense their intrusion into a religious and social system that stretched back time out of mind to the first settlers of the Nile valley. 'As the Egyptians have a climate peculiar to themselves, and their river is different in its nature from all other rivers,' Herodotus remarked, 'so have they made all their laws and customs of a kind contrary for the most part to those of all other men. Among them, the women buy and sell, the men stay at home and weave; and alone the Egyptians push the woof downwards. Men carry loads on their heads, women on their shoulders. Women relieve themselves standing, men sitting. This they do indoors, and take their food in the streets, giving the reason, that unpleasant things should be hidden from sight, but pleasant things open to the view of all. Whereas no woman is dedicated to the service of any god or goddess, men serve all deities, male or female. Sons are not obliged to support parents but daughters must always do so.'

For many centuries the Egyptians remained undisturbed in their river valley, since the surrounding deserts presented barriers formidable enough to deter foreign invaders. The perception of this natural security is apparent in the distinction they drew between 'the black land and the red land'. Egypt was the black land; other countries were the mountainous, red-earth lands. From the annual inundation of the Nile came the dark silt upon which their agricultural prosperity was founded. 'When the river overflows the countryside,' noted Herodotus, 'the whole of Egypt becomes a sea, and only the towns stick out above the surface of the water, rather like the islands of the Aegean. When this happens, people take boats across the land and not just along the waterways. . . . No men anywhere else gain so much from the soil with so little labour: farmers escape the toil of breaking up the soil with a plough or a hoe; the river rises unaided, irrigates the fields, and then drains away; seeds are broadcast and trodden in by pigs; these animals even thresh the harvested grain.' The Nile dominated the way of life as much as it determined the



configuration of the land. The Egyptians thought of the world as being a bank of earth divided in the middle by the Nile and surrounded by water, the Great Circular Ocean. This water was personified by Nun, the first of the gods, the source of the river and rain. Above the earth was the sky, held aloft by four pillars at the corners of the world.

Differences between Upper and Lower Egypt—the narrow valley running nearly 600 miles from the first cataract to Cairo, the site of ancient Memphis, as opposed to the braided streams of the delta, 400 miles wide at the Mediterranean—found expression in the mythological struggle of Osiris and Horus against Seth as well as the constitution of the state. The pharaoh was the god who united the two crowns of Upper and Lower Egypt: while he lived he was Horus, and when dead he was Osiris, king of the departed. Mummification and the cult of the dead were entwined with the Horus-Osiris myths. Unusual, too, in West Asia was the Egyptian preoccupation with the sun. Re, the sun god, according to one tradition, was the first pharaoh, and as Atum was creator of the world. It was said that Atum, either a self-created deity or the child of Nun, emerged from the primeval waters in the form of a hill. Solar worship reached its apotheosis during the short reign of Amenophis IV (1387–1366 BC). This pharaoh, better known as Akhenaton, seems to have rejected the innumerable deities which had been invoked by previous rulers, and concentrated his piety to one god, Aton, or the solar disc.

Possibly of foreign origin in very remote times, Osiris became so Egyptianized as to appear not only a truly native deity but even more the archetypal god of the dead, an aspect of human existence which preoccupied the ancient Egyptians. His own repeated death and resurrection were thought to be mirrored in the annual inundation of the Nile and the yearly growth and decline of vegetation. It was in the underworld, however, the place revealed to us in the *Book of the Dead*, that Osiris was supreme as king of eternity, ruler of everlastingness. There he sat on the throne and judged each dead person, led before him in turn by jackal-headed Anubis. Powerful though he was in the Egyptian imagination, Osiris only transferred into the Greek and Roman world in association with the cults of other gods and goddesses. It was through the elaborate mysteries of Isis, his sister and wife, that the peoples of the Roman Empire knew him. Like Serapis, whom the Ptolemies adopted as their state god during their rule of Egypt (305–30 BC), Osiris remained one of the lesser actors in her mythological cycle.

The divinity of the king was not professed in Mesopotamia, whose river valleys formed the other ancient cradle of civilization in West Asia. The Sumerian monarchs received their authority from the gods, a formula accepted equally by the later Babylonian and Assyrian kings. Kingship 'came down from heaven' and inscriptions maintain that the assembly of the gods chose and invested a monarch. In the third millen-

nium BC, the age of Sumer, the city deity was conceived of as the actual owner of the city, and the temple possessed and worked most of the irrigated land, so that the temporal ruler was rather like a steward managing the god's estates. The temple was the house in which the deity lived, was fed and clothed, and received worshippers. The religious basis of the Sumerian institution of kingship was made explicit at the time of New Year Festival when the people celebrated a holy marriage between the king and the goddess of the city, represented by a priestess. The hymns which accompanied this sacral coupling bear an amazing resemblance to the poetry of the biblical *Song of Songs*. It appears that the king impersonated Dumuzi, the god of fertility, and the priestess became the goddess Inanna: for the city their union ensured prosperity, strength, and concord. During the ascendancy of Babylon under an Amorite dynasty, the most famous ruler of which was the great legislator Hammurabi (1728–1686 BC), a change took place in the relationship of temple and throne. Although kingship was still regarded as a divine institution and the person of the ruler different from ordinary mortals, the earlier domination of the temple cult in city life began to diminish sharply, a curtailment of the priesthood that led to the unchallenged terrestrial authority of the Assyrian kings.

The origin of the 'black-headed', as the Sumerians called themselves, is uncertain. Arriving possibly from the East, they settled immediately before 3000 BC a flat desert area, with marshes, adjacent to the Persian Gulf. Their non-Semitic tongue was at first recorded in primitive pictographs, from which using clay as a writing material and a reed stylus to impress wedge-shaped signs they developed cuneiform, thereafter the script of both Sumerian and Semitic languages. In time the 'black-headed' people were swamped by Semites, who moved down the Euphrates valley in successive waves, but their contribution to ancient Mesopotamian culture was profound, especially in mythology and religion. Even after the rise of Babylon the transmission of ideas was uninterrupted as it was the practice to have Sumerian religious texts with an interlinear Akkadian translation that would be understood by the Semitic conquerors.

The cosmology of Sumer reflected the independence of this urban civilization from rainfall. Agriculture flourished on river water, spread by irrigation, and this sweet water was believed to come from a huge subterranean reservoir named Abzu. This environmental factor may have been responsible for the largely chthonic character of Sumerian religion, which placed emphasis on the natural forces of the earth rather than the celestial powers of heaven, the sky, moon, and stars, so evident in Semitic belief. The land was the domain of Enlil, city god of Nippur, and the most powerful deity of the Sumerian pantheon. In striking contrast to Egyptian mythology, the creation of mankind was seen as a deliberate act of the

gods, harassed by the necessity of obtaining their daily bread. Likewise the foundation of cities was the result of divine decree: they were built round the ziggurrats, gigantic artificial mounds of sun-dried bricks, on whose terraces dwelt the resident deities. The Babylonian creation epic, known from its first words 'When on high' as *Enuma Elish*, made service of the gods the reason for the appearance of mankind, too. In return the gods ensured the renewal of the world each day. As in Egypt, where the goddess Maat personified the correct balance of equilibrium of the universe, the early settlers of Mesopotamia were preoccupied with the ordering of the world. Another theme, however, darkens the mythology of Sumer and Babylon, and this is the notion of a titanic struggle against evil powers. Inanna has to struggle against the mountain god Ebeh, Gilgamesh was pitted against the monster Huwawa in the cedar wood, and Marduk made the universe out of the body of Tiamat, the appalling she-dragon of the watery chaos.

In the Assyrio-Babylonian pantheon the Sumerian god Enlil, known either by the same name or as Ellil, underwent a rather sinister transformation. The terrifying aspect of this god's authority over the atmosphere received emphasis; he was 'the wild ox', the hurricane, and the author of the flood sent to destroy mankind. Unlike the isolated Nile civilization, the historical experience of the inhabitants of Tigris-Euphrates valley was stormy and full of changes. Foreign invasions and internal conflicts combined with the uneven flow of its great rivers to mould a mythological outlook that found significance in cosmic struggle as much as the divine ordering of the universe. Yet the conception of a cosmic battle against maleficent forces or monstrous beings in Assyrio-Babylonian legend paled before the contemporary Persian belief in the strict dualism of good and evil, light and dark, angels and devils. In the Iranian uplands the prophet Zarathustra, or Zoroaster (c. 628-551 BC), was casting aside the more usual mythological interpretation of good and evil as effects proceeding from a unique source of being that transcends and reconciles all opposites. This singular rethinking of myth affected not only the Persians, but also the inhabitants of Mesopotamia and Canaan. When in 539 BC Babylon fell to Cyrus, West Asia was incorporated into the Persian Empire.

Zoroaster's doctrine of rewards and punishments, of heavenly bliss and infernal woe allotted to good and evil men in another life beyond the grave had a direct influence on Judeo-Christian eschatology. The exiled Hebrews in Babylon found a kindred monotheistic creed in Persian religion, and one of their own prophets, Isaiah, declared openly that Cyrus as their liberator was Yahweh's anointed. The old idea of the nether world, Sheol, a shadowy abode for all the dead, gave place to a system of dividing the sheep from the goats. 'Many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth', said Daniel, 'shall awake, some to everlasting life,

and some to shame and everlasting contempt.' Of the Zoroastrian struggle between good and evil, personified by the twin-spirits Spenta Mainya and Angra Mainya, later transformed into Ormuzd and Ahriman, an exact parallel has been discovered in the Dead Sea scrolls too. According to the *Manual of Discipline*, Yahweh 'created man to have dominion over the world and made for him two spirits, that he might walk by them until the appointed time of his visitation; they are spirits of truth and of error.'

Persia was the name used by the Greeks. The followers of Zoroaster were Aryans, and the word Iran, formed from an earlier root, simply means 'the home of the Aryans'. The Persians, therefore, had much in common with the Aryan invaders of India—close linguistic ties as well as a similar pantheon—but history took them into the Euphrates valley and the teachings of their prophet, who probably lived in Chorasmia, were destined to impact upon West Asian mythology. The Zoroastrian faith hardly exists today. Its last period of ascendancy in Persia occurred during the Sassanian Empire (226–652), which went down before Moslem arms. Only the Parsees, a tiny group of exiles living around Bombay, preserve what was once a great religious tradition.

About the mythology of Canaan, the land situated between the civilizations of Egypt and Mesopotamia, there were only a few references in classical authors to eke out the partisan account given in the *Old Testament* prior to the discovery of clay tablets in 1929 at Ras Shamra, the ancient city of Ugarit. The Arab peasant who stumbled upon its necropolis indirectly caused a revolution in our thinking about the West Semites. The tablets subsequently unearthed by archaeologists were impressed with a previously unknown cuneiform script of an archaic Canaanite language, and when deciphered they gave a picture of the religion of prosperous Ugarit about 1400 BC. Although this represents a very important addition to our knowledge of ancient Canaan, much more than a mere background to the better recorded Hebrew tradition, it remains the case that we have little detail of the myths belonging to the Aramaean peoples of Syria and the Nabataeans to the east of the Dead Sea.

The name Canaan derived from a shellfish famous for the dye it produced. The Phoenicians living in the coastal cities of Tyre, Sidon, and Byblos, or in their colonies dotted around the eastern Mediterranean, called themselves Canaanites. It was the Romans who introduced Poeni to distinguish the colonists at Carthage from the inhabitants of the motherland. Few sharp cultural divisions existed in Canaan. Even Israel, the supremely religious nation of West Asia, had a composite population, and the Hebrews were certainly not the only ones in the exodus from Egypt. Those who followed Joshua in his conquest of Palestine sometime after 1300 BC were assorted tribesmen bound together by their