

1. The Ladder-to-Heaven

“Who hath ascended up into heaven, and come down?”¹

Most of us are familiar with the story of Jacob’s ladder, wherein the son of Isaac dreamed he saw a ladder extending to heaven. Isaiah’s account of Jacob’s dream has long formed a crux for students of the Old Testament: “And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it.”²

The passage describing Jacob’s ladder appears as if out of thin air, with little regard for context or a commonsense understanding of the natural world. It is as if the story’s original context had been lost to the redactors of the Old Testament. Whatever the circumstances behind the decision to include the story in its present minimalist form, it is evident that the tradition of Jacob’s ladder was deemed too important to be omitted all together.

That the Biblical account of Jacob’s ladder contains ideas of great antiquity and popularity has long been noted.³ Indeed, the ladder-to-heaven motif is attested on all inhabited continents (F52 in Thompson’s Index). The present chapter will offer a cross-cultural analysis of the theme in question and discuss its relationship to other familiar mythological motifs. At the conclusion of our survey, an attempt will be made to reconstruct the extraordinary events that inspired the ladder-to-heaven theme, thereby allowing us to better understand its original historical context.

When the sky was near

A seemingly universal belief holds that in primeval times heaven was located fairly close to earth—so close, in fact, that traffic between the two was commonplace. It was in such times, according to the testimony of sacred traditions around the world, that a luminous

¹ *Proverbs* 30.

² *Genesis* 28:12.

³ T. Gaster, *Myth, Legend, and Custom in the Old Testament* (New York, 1969), pp. 184-187.

ladder spanned the sky thereby allowing for ready access to the celestial kingdom. Alas, the ladder-to-heaven was not to last and it eventually collapsed whereupon the sky was uplifted to its present height.

The continent of Africa offers a wealth of testimony attesting to a ladder-to-heaven in former times. Witness the following traditions collected by Breutz:

“The concept that the sky is solid and connected to the earth by a ladder, rope or chain, is found mainly in the Niger bend, in Volta, and among the Yoruba in Nigeria. Hoffman...reports that the Mamabolo (Northern Sotho of Rhodesian origin) say that the sky god Modimo went up to heaven on a ladder, from which he removed the rungs. The same...is said of the Lamba god Leza. The sky-ladder myth is also found among the Rotse in Zambia, where their deity is said to have ascended along the thread of a cobweb...In addition the Tsonga and Zulu have a tradition concerning a ladder or rope leading up to the sky.”⁴

Similar traditions are evident in West Africa, as James Frazer documented at the turn of the previous century:

“In almost all the series of native traditions there, you will find accounts of a time when there was direct intercourse between the gods or spirits that live in the sky, and men. That intercourse is always said to have been cut off by some human error; for example, the Fernando Po people say that once upon a time there was no trouble of serious disturbance upon earth because there was a ladder, made like the one you get palm-nuts with, only ‘long, long’; and this ladder reached from heaven to earth so the gods could go up and down it and attend personally to mundane affairs. But one day a cripple boy started to go up the ladder, and he got a long way up when his mother saw him, and went

⁴ P. Breutz, “Sotho-Tswana Celestial Concepts,” in *Ethnological and Linguistic Studies in Honour of N. J. van Warmelo* (Pretoria, 1969), pp. 199-200.

up in pursuit. The gods, horrified at the prospect of having boys and women invading heaven, threw down the ladder, and have since left humanity severely alone.”⁵

The ladder-to-heaven motif is also well represented in Aboriginal Australia. Thus, the Milingimbi from Arnhem Land tell the story of Inua’s attempt to construct a ladder from fish vertebrae in the aftermath of his sister’s assault by another man:

“Guessing what was wrong and not wishing to be involved in a domestic quarrel, he ran back to camp, joined the discarded fish vertebrae end on end to make a long ladder and climbed to the sky, pulling the ladder up after him so that no one could follow.”⁶

Catasterized into a star or planet, Inua lived happily ever after along the banks of a celestial river.

Chinese lore recalls a time when a ladder spanned heaven, thereby allowing regular trafficking between the two worlds. Yuan Ke summarized the various traditions as follows:

“In those days there was a ladder between heaven and earth. The gods and fairies and witches all came and went easily between the two places.”⁷

That the “gods and fairies and witches” employed the ladder-to-heaven in their ascents and descents recalls the account in Genesis wherein “the angels of God” made a practice of ascending and descending Jacob’s ladder.

⁵ J. Frazer, *Folklore in the Old Testament* (New York, 1988), pp. 228-229.

⁶ C. Mountford, *Arnhem Land: Art, Myth and Symbolism* (Melbourne, 1968), p. 492.

⁷ Y. Ke, *Dragons and Dynasties* (Singapore, 1991), p. 33.

The Chain of Arrows

Tales of an ascent to heaven are commonplace in the New World. According to the pioneering anthropologist Franz Boas, “the scaling of heaven is a saga which occurs very often in America.”⁸ An oral tradition collected from the Tlingit Indians of British Columbia relates that, once upon a time, the son of a great chief absentmindedly set about shooting arrows upon the sudden disappearance of his friend:

“He thought, ‘Now I am going to shoot that star next to the moon.’ In that spot was a large and very bright one. He shot an arrow at this star and sat down to watch, when, sure enough, the star darkened. Now he began shooting at that star from the big pile of arrows he and his chum had made, and he was encouraged by seeing that the arrows did not come back. After he had shot for some time he saw something hanging down very near him and, when he shot up another arrow, it stuck to this. The next did likewise, and at last a chain of arrows reached him...Now the youth felt badly for the loss of his friend and, lying down under the arrow chain, he went to sleep. After a while he awoke, found himself sleeping on that hill, remembered the arrows he had shot away, and looked up. Instead of the arrows there was a long ladder reaching right down to him.”⁹

Apparent in the Tlingit oral tradition is the so-called chain of arrows motif (F53 in Thompson’s Index). Here a hero shoots a series of arrows skyward in order to form a ladder upon which to ascend to heaven. Raffaele Pettazzoni devoted an entire monograph to this widespread motif, wherein he offered the following summary:

“Another motive is that of the chain of arrows by which one or more personages of the legend climb from earth to heaven, and sometimes descend again. The hero hurls darts; one embeds itself in the celestial vault, then another embeds itself exactly in the notch of

⁸ F. Boas, “Indianische Sagen von der Nordwestküste Amerikas,” *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 27 (1895), p. 498.

⁹ S. Thompson, *Tales of the North American Indians* (Bloomington, 1966), p. 132.

the first, a third in the second, and so on until they form a long chain of arrows upon which the hero mounts as upon a ladder to heaven.”¹⁰

In a Kwakiutl tale from British Columbia the ascending hero is the notorious trickster Mink, alleged to have been conceived when his mother became impregnated by the rays of the Sun. It seems that Mink’s playmates made a habit of poking fun at him for his alleged bastard status and, upon being informed by his mother of his father’s identity, the youth resolves to ascend to the house of the Sun. At that point Mink begins shooting arrows at the sky:

“Then Born-to-be-the-Sun shot one of the arrows upward. It is said it struck our sky. Then he shot another one upward. It struck the nock of the one that he had shot upward first; then again another one, and it hit the end of his arrow. His arrows came down sticking together. Then he shot the last one, and it hit the end of the one he had shot before. They came to the ground. Then the mother of Born-to-be-the-Sun took the end of the arrows and shook them, and they became a rope...Then Born-to-be-the-Sun climbed, going upward. He went to visit his father. He arrived, and went through to the upper side of the sky.”¹¹

That the ladder-to-heaven leads to the kingdom of the sun-god is a recurring and widespread belief. This datum will prove to be a key piece of evidence in reconstructing the astronomical background of the mythological imagery in question. An interesting example of this motif comes from the Tsimshian Indians from British Columbia:

“The sky is a beautiful open country. It is reached through the hole in the sky, which opens and closes...The sky may also be reached by means of a ladder which extends from the mountains to the sky...After reaching the sky, the visitor finds himself on a trail

¹⁰ R. Pettazzoni, “The Chain of Arrows: The Diffusion of a Mythical Motive,” *Folklore* 35 (1924), pp. 155-156.

¹¹ J. Frazer, “Phaethon and the Sun,” in *Apollodorus: The Library Vol. II* (Cambridge, 1963), p. 392.

which leads to the house of the Sun chief. In this house the Sun lives with his daughter...The Sun's daughter is the Evening Star."¹²

On the other side of the globe the chain of arrows motif can be found amongst the Melanesians of the South Sea Islands. Thus, the natives of Leper's Island (New Hebrides) relate how the hero Tagaro once attempted to follow his wife and son who had escaped to the sky-world:

"At last he had an idea. Quickly making a powerful bow and a hundred arrows, he shot one of them at the sky. The arrow struck firmly, and he then shot another into the butt of the first, and a third into the butt of the second, and thus, one after another, he sent his arrows, making an arrow-chain, until, when he had sped the last one, the end of the chain reached the earth. Then from the sky a banian-root crept down the arrow-chain and took root in the earth. Tagaro breathed upon it, and it grew larger and stronger, whereupon, taking all his ornaments, he and the bird climbed the banian-root to the sky."¹³

Traditions of primeval ascents to heaven along ladders or chains of arrows are widespread in South America as well. The idea has been documented among the Mataco,¹⁴ the Chorote,¹⁵ the Nivalké,¹⁶ and the Tupi,¹⁷ among other indigenous tribes. The Nivalké tell of the time when a reed-like ladder descended from the sky:

¹² F. Boas, "Tsimshian Mythology," *ARBAE* 31 (1916), pp. 453-454.

¹³ R. Dixon, "Oceanic Mythology," in L. Gray ed., *The Mythology of All Races* (Boston, 1916), p. 139.

¹⁴ J. Wilbert & K. Simoneau, *Folk Literature of the Mataco Indians* (Los Angeles, 1982), pp. 38, 41, 44.

¹⁵ J. Wilbert & K. Simoneau, *Folk Literature of the Chorote Indians* (Los Angeles, 1985), pp. 225-226.

¹⁶ J. Wilbert & K. Simoneau, *Folk Literature of the Nivalké Indians* (Los Angeles, 1987), pp. 55-56; 424-425.

¹⁷ R. Pettazzoni, *op. cit.*, p. 159, writes as follows of the Amazonian traditions: "Along the river Amazon and among the Tupi, particularly those in the east and on the coast, but also among the western branches (Guarayos), is frequently found in the folklore the motive of the chain of arrows."

“Suddenly, from up there, where the stars come out, a ladder descended. It was made from the same kind of reeds that the Indians used for the shafts of their arrows. Suddenly a ladder made of reeds appeared; it reached from the sky down to the ground.”¹⁸

The Shipaya also envisaged the ladder-to-heaven as composed of reeds. The anthropologist Métraux collected the following tradition:

“The Shipaya used for the ascension a ladder of taquara reeds. As the people were about to return to the earth, a storm broke the ladder and some Shipaya were forced to remain in the sky...”¹⁹

According to the Mataco, a towering ladder made a thunderous noise when it fell from heaven. One narrative describes the primeval occasion as follows:

“Something fell from above, making a metallic sound. It was an iron ladder that reached from the sky all the way down to the earth.”²⁰

The Chorote of Gran Chaco make a hummingbird named Sen the first to succeed in ascending to heaven. In the early days of the world the bird began shooting arrows one after the other until he had a long chain extending from heaven to earth. Shortly thereafter, a spider came along and spun a web alongside the arrow chain thereby creating a rope-like structure reaching to heaven. It was along this rope that Sen and the other Chorote heroes, as birds, ascended to heaven.²¹

¹⁸ J. Wilbert & K. Simoneau, *Folk Literature of the Nivaklé Indians* (Los Angeles, 1987), p. 66.

¹⁹ A. Métraux, *Myths of the Toba and Pilaga Indians of the Gran Chaco* (Philadelphia, 1946), p. 26.

²⁰ J. Wilbert & K. Simoneau, *Folk Literature of the Mataco Indians* (Los Angeles, 1982), p. 76.

²¹ J. Wilbert & K. Simoneau, *Folk Literature of the Chorote Indians* (Los Angeles, 1985), pp. 225-226.

In this Chorote tradition, as in the aforementioned Kwakiutl tradition involving Mink, the arrow-chain is intimately related to a rope spanning heaven. This datum will prove important when we attempt to visualize and reconstruct the physical structure of the ladder to heaven. In reality the two mythological structures—the chain of arrows and the rope to heaven—are fundamentally analogous and trace to the same basic celestial phenomenon. Thus it is that the sacred traditions of various cultures speak of “climbing” up a “rope of arrows.”²²

A fascinating example of the chain of arrows motif was preserved by the Sikuani Indians of the tropical savannas along the Orinoco river (in modern Colombia). They describe how the hero Tsamani employed an arrow-ladder in order to scale the heavenly vault. In one version of this myth, the hero implores his comrades to gather their arrows and follow him upward:

“‘The bow and arrows are the path that we are going to use to get to the sky.’ So each took his bow and his quiver of arrows...and began to shoot at the sky, aiming each arrow at the tail end of the one fired before it so that they would form a ladder to the ground...That way they reached the sky, climbing up inside the arrows in the form of termites.”²³

According to the Sikuani, Tsamani’s ascent was only possible because of the sky’s former close proximity to the earth. Or so it is reported in the following variant of the aforementioned narrative:

“In those days the firmament was low. The next day they shot an arrow upward, and it stuck in the sky. They shot another arrow into the end of that one, and continued

²² J. Wilbert & K. Simoneau, *Folk Literature of the Nivalké Indians* (Los Angeles, 1987), p. 425. See also the traditions preserved by F. Boas, “Tsimshian Mythology,” *op. cit.*, p. 864.

²³ J. Wilbert & K. Simoneau, *Folk Literature of the Sikuani Indians* (Los Angeles, 1992), pp. 89-90.

shooting arrows in this way until they had a chain reaching all the way down to the ground.”²⁴

Tsamani’s arrow-chain is elsewhere said to have had “the shape of a ladder, like a vine,” an idea we have already encountered in Melanesian lore.²⁵ Eventually, after many years and much mischief, the ladder was destroyed.

Yet another variant of this narrative told by the same tribe preserves additional motifs of interest to our study. Upon ascending to heaven along the ladder, Tsamani and the others turned into stars set next to the sun:

“In those days the sky was not as it is now. Mava told them to shoot at one side of the door, the left side, and they did as he said...The older brothers kept shooting at the door, one arrow after another, until the ladder made by the arrows nearly reached the earth, coming as close as a meter from the earth. They asked one another: ‘How are we going to go up that path?’ Pumenerrua [a woman] called her boyfriend and asked him how they would climb up. He told them to turn into termites to ascend. She was the first to do so, and once she had arrived at her boyfriend’s side the path turned into a kind of ladder on which all of them climbed up. They remained in the sky, to one side of the sun.”²⁶

The Sikuan report that the ancient sky “was not as it is now” will be corroborated again and again during the course of this study.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

The World Tree

Sacred narratives everywhere describe a previous World Age in which a colossal tree dominated the celestial landscape, joining heaven to earth.²⁷ By climbing this tree mythical heroes were able to visit heaven and converse with the gods. A few examples should suffice to illustrate the fundamental affinity between the World Tree and ladder-to-heaven.

The Polynesians colonized a vast area extending from New Zealand to Hawaii. Renowned for their seafaring skills, the Polynesians carried with them a significant corpus of mythological lore involving the various celestial bodies. More than one group believed it was possible to travel to the celestial kingdom using a ladder or tree. The Fiji Islanders, for example, tell the following story:

“The hero of a Fijian legend is a warrior who is the son of Tui-Langi, i.e., of the King of Heaven, or of Heaven itself personified, which at that time was considerably closer to the earth. The warrior climbs up on to a tree, into which his stick had changed itself, and arrives in heaven.”²⁸

As this tradition attests, the Fiji Islanders, together with countless other cultures, believed that heaven formerly rested close to earth.

In North America, the Algonquin tell of a hero's ascent to heaven along a giant tree. There it is the dwarf Tchakabech who makes the primeval ascent in order to reach the kingdom of the sun-god: “He decided to ascend to the Sky and climbed upward on a tree, which grew as he breathed upon it, until he reached the heavens, where he found the loveliest country in the world.”²⁹

²⁷ M. Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (New York, 1958), pp. 265-326.

²⁸ L. Fison, *Tales from Old Fiji* (London, 1894), pp. 49ff.

²⁹ H. Alexander, “North American,” in L. Gray ed., *The Mythology of All Races, Vol. 10* (Boston, 1917), pp. 48-49.

The idea of a World Tree serving as a ladder-to-heaven is also found in South America. Thus, the Toba Indians of the Gran Chaco tell the following story:

“There used to be a tree called Latee Na Mapik...It reached all the way up into the sky. Men used to climb that tree to reach the first sky.”³⁰

The Mataco preserve a very similar tradition. They recall the time when, “at the beginning of the world the Indians, by making use of a very tall tree, often climbed up to the sky to gather honey and fish.”³¹ A related narrative from the same tribe reports:

“Formerly sky and earth were connected by a big tree. The men of this earth climbed up it and went to hunt in the world above.”³²

The creation myth of the Makka Indians tells of a giant tree spanning heaven and earth:

“There was once a very tall *lignum vitae* tree, so tall that it reached the heavens. It had huge roots and many branches. People used to climb it until they reached the highest point of the tree, and then the sky...”³³

Such paradisiacal conditions were not to last. Amidst cataclysmic circumstances, the towering tree collapsed in a great conflagration:

“When they returned, the people saw their ladder burning. The tree was like a ladder because it was very tall.”³⁴

³⁰ J. Wilbert & K. Simoneau, *Folk Literature of the Toba Indians, Vol. 2* (Los Angeles, 1989), p. 69.

³¹ J. Wilbert & K. Simoneau, *Folk Literature of the Mataco Indians* (Los Angeles, 1982), p. 45.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 46.

³³ J. Wilbert & K. Simoneau, *Folk Literature of the Makka Indians* (Los Angeles, 1991), p. 193.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

That the Makka themselves likened the World Tree to a “ladder” extending to heaven suggests that they recognized a fundamental affinity between the two celestial forms.

Various tribes in South America believed that the souls of the dead were wont to climb along a giant tree uniting heaven and Earth. This idea is apparent in the following Mocovi narrative:

“The Mocovi imagined a tree, which they called Nalliagdigua, so tall that it reached from the earth to the sky. Climbing up from branch to branch, the souls went fishing in a river.”³⁵

Analogous ideas are apparent among the Guarani and Carib Indians:

“In the north of South America it is believed that the souls of the dead ascend ‘the tree of heaven’ in a garden, at the top of which they would meet their creator, called Tamoi among the Guarani, or Tamu among the Carib.”³⁶

The idea that souls were accustomed to climbing the World Tree in order to gain their eternal reward naturally recalls the Biblical tradition that angels employed Jacob’s ladder as a celestial escalator.

The collapse of the World Tree was remembered as a colossal calamity. A Mocovi narrative attributes its destruction to the gnawing of an angry hag: “She did not stop until she had felled it, causing deep sorrow among the Mocovi and doing them irreparable harm.”³⁷

³⁵ J. Wilbert & K. Simoneau, *Folk Literature of the Mocovi Indians* (Los Angeles, 1988), p. 46.

³⁶ M. A. van der Sluijs, “The Cosmic String of Pearls,” *Aeon* 6:4 (2003), p. 33.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

The Chamacoco tell of a time when a giant tree spanned the sky. One narrative reports that the Sun and Moon lived on Earth during that primeval period when the sky was nearer than now:

“This story is about the time when the sky was near...There was a tree called *eebe*...Well, the one which the people used to climb up and down between the sky and the earth was the *eebe*...It had many leaves which they could climb on like a ladder, and they would climb all the way up to the sky...There was no sun and no stars; all these were living among the people. Sun and Moon lived like human beings...When the insect cut down the tree and it fell, Sun and Moon left and moved up to the sky.”³⁸

According to the Chamacoco, the collapse of the World Tree caused the major heavenly bodies to move away from Earth. And as a result of that cataclysmic event, the sky no longer rested on the Earth. The same basic idea is made explicit in the following Sikuani narrative:

“As the last liana [vine] was severed the tree fell to the ground. The sky moved upward, for previously it had been very low, near the top of the food tree...Then the flood came...Many people drowned. All the survivors gathered on Sibó, the hill that is shaped like the roof of a house. It was the only hill that was above water.”³⁹

That a cataclysmic flood followed close upon the collapse of the World Tree is a theme we will encounter again in this study.

For the Makiritare of the Orinoco river region (Venezuela), the destruction of the World Tree marked the end of the world. In their sacred oral account of creation, known as *Watunna*, the following memory can be found:

³⁸ J. Wilbert & K. Simoneau, *Folk Literature of the Chamacoco Indians* (Los Angeles, 1987), pp. 31-33.

³⁹ J. Wilbert & K. Simoneau, *Folk Literature of the Sikuani Indians* (Los Angeles, 1992), p. 214.

“Kadio cut Marahuaka. He cut it up there in Heaven. It was an upside down tree, with its roots on top. Then the great Marahuaka tree finally fell. It felt like the sky was falling. It was the end of the world.”⁴⁰

The fact that the Marahuaka tree is elsewhere described as a towering mountain suggests that the Makiritare recognized the structural homology of the World Tree and World Mountain.⁴¹

The idea that a World Tree formerly joined heaven and earth is also attested in Australian lore. According to the Aborigines of the Great Australian Bight a giant tree named Warda upheld the sky.⁴² A neighboring tribe tells of an ascent to heaven along a World Tree known as Bandara:

“The sacred tree Bandara, the tree of life...It was up the trunk of the Bandara tree that the high being Galalang climbed into the sky, after being killed by men who threw his body into the sea.”⁴³

Analogous beliefs can be found across the Australian continent, as Diane Johnson has documented:

“The sky-world beyond the dome was envisaged as containing a hole, a window or a fissure, through which the traditional healers could gain entry...Among some Victorian groups there was a view that people used to be able to climb up an immense pine tree...up through its branches to the topmost ones which reached the sky...The tree was viewed as ‘a regular highway between earth and the upper regions’. Around the Roper River area, amongst the Alawa people in the Northern Territory, the link was also a tree...In an account of the Booandik people of South Australia, the healer (*pangal*)

⁴⁰ M. de Civrieux, *Watunna: An Orinoco Creation Cycle* (San Francisco, 1980), p. 135.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

⁴² D. Johnson, *Night Skies of Aboriginal Australia* (Sydney, 1998), p. 14.

⁴³ E. Worms, *Australian Aboriginal Religions* (Richmond, 1986), p. 27.

climbed to the sky-world quite regularly to visit and have social discourse with the sky people.”⁴⁴

Here, once again, we meet with the idea of the World Tree as a road to heaven.

A World Tree spanning heaven is attested in Chinese lore as well, this despite the fact that a series of infamous book-burnings destroyed the vast majority of early mythological texts. In Chinese cosmology the World Tree was associated with the center of the world:

“The concept of the cosmic tree which forms the centre of the world may be traced in Chinese literature from the Chan-kuo period, in various guises. Sometimes it appears as a single tree, such as the Fu-sang or the Jo-mu; later it is known as the beautiful tree whose growth stems from a pair of trunks, the Mu-lien-li. At times the tree is conceived as connecting the three worlds of heaven, earth and the Yellow Springs; and as such it may be compared to the ladder by means of which Fu Hsi and his sister ascended to heaven. As the Fu-sang, the concept embraces the tree up which the sun climbs and descends, once daily.”⁴⁵

Apparent here is the archaic belief that the daily epiphany of the ancient sun-god occurred in conjunction with a heaven-spanning tree.⁴⁶ Like so many of the mythological themes encountered in this monograph, this is an idea that will not be readily explained by reference to the familiar skies inasmuch as it is not possible for the current Sun to “climb and descend” the same tree once daily. Yet the very same idea is attested in ancient Egypt.⁴⁷

Elsewhere in China the World Tree was known as Jianmu. Located at the center of the world, the Jianmu tree formed a ladder reaching to heaven:

⁴⁴ D. Johnson, *op. cit.*, pp. 14-15.

⁴⁵ M. Loewe, *Ways to Paradise* (London, 1979), p. 111.

⁴⁶ See also S. Allan, *The Shape of the Turtle* (Albany, 1991), pp. 27, 44.

⁴⁷ See the discussion in I. Gamer-Wallert, “Heiliger Baum,” *LÄ, Vol. I* (Berlin, 1977), cols. 655-660.

“In the wilderness at Dukuang in the southwest was a heavenly ladder coming from a tree called *Jianmu*. *Jianmu*’s tall branches reached into the clouds, and the top branches circled and entwined in the shape of an umbrella. The *Jianmu* heavenly ladder was thought to have been in the center of the world, and it was here that the gods climbed between heaven and earth.”⁴⁸

Aboriginal tribes from Indonesia likewise placed the World Tree at the center of the world. In primeval times it was possible to climb to heaven along this tree:

“The Bataks of Sumatra say that at the middle of the earth there was formerly a rock, of which the top reached up to heaven, and by which certain privileged beings, such as heroes and priests, could mount up to the sky. In heaven there grew a great fig-tree (*waringin*) which sent down its roots to meet the rock, thus enabling mortals to swarm up it to the mansions on high.”⁴⁹

The location of the Tree-ladder at the “center of the world” confirms its intimate relationship to ancient conceptions of the *axis mundi*, the latter believed to connect heaven, earth, and the underworld.⁵⁰ The scholar who has done the most to elucidate the elaborate and multivalent symbolism associated with the *axis mundi* is the Romanian comparatist Mircea Eliade:

“If we try to achieve a general view of all the myths and rites just briefly reviewed, we are struck by the fact that they have a dominant idea in common: communication between heaven and earth can be brought about—or could be *in illo tempore*—by some physical means (rainbow, bridge, stairs, ladder, vine, cord, ‘chain of arrows’, mountain, etc., etc.). All of these symbolic images of the connection between heaven and earth are merely variants of the World Tree or the *axis mundi*...the myth and symbolism of the Cosmic

⁴⁸ Y. Ke, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

⁴⁹ T. Gaster, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

⁵⁰ See the extensive discussion of this theme in M. Eliade, *Shamanism* (Princeton, 1964), pp. 259ff.

Tree imply the idea of a ‘Center of the World,’ of a point where earth, sky, and underworld meet.”⁵¹

In his discussion of the symbolism attached to the World Tree, Eliade concedes that it has hitherto eluded all attempts at a scientific classification or understanding: “There is a considerable amount of material; but it takes such a variety of forms as to baffle any attempt at systematic classification.”⁵² The same scholar went on to pose the following question: “One wonders what mental synthesis, and from what special characteristics of trees as such enabled primitive mankind to produce so vast and so coherent a symbolism.”⁵³

Upon ruling out a naturalistic explanation of the symbolism in question, Eliade sought a celestial prototype for the World Tree. Citing evidence from ancient Mesopotamia, the renowned comparativist offered the following observation:

“None of the emblems attached to trees can be interpreted in a naturist sense for the simple reason that nature itself was something quite different in Mesopotamian thought from what it is in modern thought and experience. We need only remind ourselves that to the Mesopotamians, as to primitive man in general, no being, no action that *means* anything has any effectiveness except in so far as the being has a heavenly prototype, or the action reproduces a primeval cosmological one.”⁵⁴

Overlooked by Eliade—and by virtually every other comparativist of note—is the possibility that, in their traditions of the World Tree, the ancients were accurately describing their experience of a heavenly prototype (in figurative language, admittedly), one no longer present. How else are we to explain the fact that descriptions of the World Tree are so similar around the world and yet so at odds with the appearance of the modern heavens? As we intend to document in this chapter, the most logical explanation

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 492-493.

⁵² M. Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (New York, 1958), p. 265.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 267-268.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 273.

of the evidence at hand is as follows: In primeval times a luminous tree-like apparition dominated the skies overhead, albeit in a solar system configured much differently than at present.

The Separation of Heaven and Earth

In order to understand the ladder-to-heaven motif it is necessary to establish its proper mytho-historical context. The ladder-to-heaven, as we have seen, was said to have existed during that primeval period when heaven was closer to the earth than at present. This apparently universal belief in a former Age marked by the close proximity (or union) of heaven and earth is intimately related to a correlate belief—namely, that the gods once lived on earth and only departed with its separation from heaven. The gods themselves, in turn, are explicitly identified with the most prominent celestial bodies. We have already encountered this idea amongst the Chamacoco of South America, who held that “before the sky moved upward, when the sky was very near, Sun and Moon were still people.”⁵⁵

Virtually identical beliefs will be found around the world. The following tradition from aboriginal Australia may be taken as representative in this regard:

“All over Australia, it is believed that the stars and planets were once men, women and animals in Creation times, who flew up to the sky as a result of some mishap on earth and took refuge there in their present form.”⁵⁶

Fundamental to this constellation of interrelated mythological motifs is the belief that an epoch-ending catastrophe marked the rupture of the idyllic relations that formerly prevailed between gods and men, an event often linked directly to the collapse of the ladder-to-heaven. Prior to the catastrophe in question a veritable Golden Age had

⁵⁵ J. Wilbert & K. Simoneau, *Folk Literature of the Chamacoco Indians* (Los Angeles, 1987), p. 74.

⁵⁶ J. Isaacs, *Australian Dreaming, 40,000 years of Australian History* (Sydney, 1980), p. 141.

prevailed. According to the Chamacoco, it will be remembered, the celestial bodies only moved to heaven with the destruction of the World Tree:

“This story is about the time when the sky was near...There was a tree called *eebe*...It had many leaves which they could climb on like a ladder, and they would climb all the way up to the sky...There was no sun and no stars; all these were living among the people. Sun and Moon lived like human beings...When the insect cut down the tree and it fell, Sun and Moon left and moved up to the sky.”⁵⁷

The spectacular events remembered as the “departure of the gods” were so mesmerizing and traumatic that ancient cultures everywhere sought to recreate or re-experience the Eden-like conditions that prevailed during the Golden Age. Indeed, countless rites were conducted with the express purpose of commemorating and reenacting the glorious time of the beginnings. Recall again the conclusion of Mircea Eliade, quoted earlier:

“If we try to achieve a general view of all the myths and rites just briefly reviewed, we are struck by the fact that they have a dominant idea in common: communication between heaven and earth can be brought about—or could be *in illo tempore*—by some physical means (rainbow, bridge, stairs, ladder, vine, cord, ‘chain of arrows’, mountain, etc., etc.). All of these symbolic images of the connection between heaven and earth are merely variants of the World Tree or the *axis mundi*...The myth and symbolism of the Cosmic Tree imply the idea of a ‘Center of the World,’ of a point where earth, sky, and underworld meet...The symbolism of the ‘Center of the World’ is also indissolubly connected with the myth of a primordial time when communications between heaven and earth, gods and mortals, were not merely possible but easy and within reach of all mankind. The myths we have just reviewed generally refer to this primordial *illud tempus*, but some of them tell of a celestial ascent performed by a hero or sovereign or sorcerer *after* communication was broken off; in other words, they imply the possibility, for certain privileged or elect persons, of returning to the origin of time, of recovering the

⁵⁷ J. Wilbert & K. Simoneau, *Folk Literature of the Chamacoco Indians* (Los Angeles, 1987), pp. 31-33.

mythical and paradisaical moment before the ‘fall,’ that is, before the break in communications between heaven and earth.”⁵⁸

Several volumes would be required in order to document the extraordinary popularity and influence of this belief-system. Mircea Eliade, in any case, has already adduced a large body of evidence. For our purposes here a few representative examples must suffice. The following tradition from the Papago Indians of Southwestern Arizona captures the essence of the primordial *illud tempus* motif:

“Those first days of the world were happy and peaceful. The sun was then nearer the earth than he is now: his rays made all the seasons equable and clothing superfluous. Men and animals talked together: a common language united them in bonds of brotherhood. But a terrible catastrophe put an end to those golden days. A great flood destroyed all flesh wherein was the breath of life.”⁵⁹

Recognizable in the Papagoan account are the archetypal mythological motifs of the Golden Age, the Deluge, and apocalyptic cataclysm. Evident also is the widespread belief that the Sun stood nearer to the Earth in primeval times than at present.

Like countless other indigenous cultures, the Maya remembered a time when communication between heaven and earth was rendered easy by a “rope” suspended in the sky. Thus, a Yucatecan account of the Creation tells of a celestial road allowing ready trafficking between the two worlds:

“There was a road suspended in the sky, stretching from Tuloom and Coba to Chich’en Itza and Uxmal. This pathway was called the *kuxan sum* or *sakbe*. It was in the nature of a large rope [*sum*] supposed to be living [*kuxan*] and in the middle flowed blood. It was by this rope that the food was sent to the ancient rulers who lived in the structures in

⁵⁸ M. Eliade, *Shamanism* (Princeton, 1964), pp. 492-493.

⁵⁹ J. Frazer, *Folklore in the Old Testament* (New York, 1988), p. 110.

ruins. For some reason this rope vanished forever. This first epoch was separated from the second by a flood called *Halyokokab*.”⁶⁰

A primeval deluge, it will be noted, is said to have followed the “vanishing” of the celestial rope. This tradition mirrors the Papagoan report that a flood accompanied the catastrophe that marked the end of the Golden Age. It also recalls the Sikuni narrative wherein a great flood followed the collapse of the World Tree.

The Mayan belief that a giant rope served as a “road” to heaven finds a close parallel in the Old World. Thus it is that, in Manchuria, Tungus shamans refer to the celestial rope as a “road” to heaven.⁶¹

Analogous beliefs are attested from aboriginal Australia. According to the Ringa-Ringaroo, “ropes” descending from the planet Venus allowed for extraterrestrial visits:

“The Ringa-Ringaroo call the star Venus *mimungoona*, or *big-eye*, and believe that it is a fertile country covered with *bappa*, the name of a sort of grass, the seeds of which the tribes here on earth convert into flour, and is inhabited by blacks. It appears, however, that no water exists in the star, but there are ropes which hang from its surface to the earth, by means of which the dwellers visit our planet from time to time, and assuage their thirst.”⁶²

In Africa sacred traditions tell of a “path” that formerly connected heaven and earth. It was by means of this path that men used to ascend to heaven to converse with the gods: “According to traditions of the Dinkas, heaven and earth were once connected by a path upon which men mounted to heaven at their pleasure.”⁶³

⁶⁰ D. Freidel, L. Schele, & J. Parker, *Maya Cosmos* (New York, 1993), p. 106.

⁶¹ M. Eliade, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

⁶² E. M. Curr, *The Australian Race, Vol. II* (Melbourne, 1886), p. 351.

⁶³ R. Pettazoni, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

The path to heaven, alternately described as a road or rope, was likened to a ladder-like structure. The collapse of the ladder-to-heaven, in Africa as in South America, was intimately related to the separation of heaven and earth in primeval times:

“The Heaven-ladder as rope or chain is the means of communication that connects the heavenly world with the earth; it was accidentally destroyed in primeval times. Heaven was separated from earth as a result, and in reality one could understand this myth as a variant of the myth of the separation of heaven and earth proper. Among the Pangwe, Vili and Hausa the Heaven-ladder even occurs together with the myth of the separation of heaven and earth.”⁶⁴

The aboriginal peoples of Indochina tell of a navel-string that once connected heaven to earth. With the severing of the celestial *umbilicus* heaven moved away:

“In olden days, when the earth was very young, they say that heaven and earth were very near to one another, because the navel-string of heaven drew the earth very close to it. This navel-string of heaven, resembling flesh, linked a hill near Sumer with heaven. At that time all the subjects of the Siem of Myllem throughout his kingdom came to one decision, i.e. to sever the navel-string from that hill. After they had cut it, the navel-string became short; and, as soon as it shortened, heaven then ascended high. It was since that time that heaven became so high.”⁶⁵

The report that the celestial navel-string resembled flesh recalls the “living” rope uniting heaven and earth in Maya lore. Indeed, the belief that the *axis mundi* was “flesh-like” in

⁶⁴ H. Baumann, *Schöpfung und Urzeit des Menschen im Mythos der afrikanischen Völker* (Berlin, 1936), p. 209 reads as follows: “Die Himmelsleiter als Strick oder Kette ist das Verbindungsmittel, das die Welt der Himmlischen mit der Erde verbindet und in der Urzeit durch irgendeinen Zufall zerschnitten wurde. So wurde die Himmelssphäre von der Erde getrennt, und tatsächlich könnte man diese Mythen als Varianten der Himmel-Erde-Trennungsmysmen echter Art (Emporheben des Himmels und so weiter) auffassen. Bei den Pangwe, Vili und Hausa kommen sogar Himmelsleiter und Himmel-Erde-Trennungsmythe zusammen vor.”

⁶⁵ W. Staudacher, *Die Trennung von Himmel und Erde* (Darmstadt, 1968), p. 26.

nature is attested around the globe. In ancient Mesopotamia, for example, the World Tree uniting heaven and earth was identified as the “flesh of the gods”:

“Where is the Mesu tree, the flesh of the gods, the ornament of the king of the universe? That pure tree...whose roots reached as deep down as the bottom of the underworld...whose top reached as high as the sky of Anum?”⁶⁶

Sumerian lore preserves analogous ideas. Thus, in a Sumerian account of Creation, the god Enlil resolves to establish an *axis mundi* at Duranki, the latter word signifying a “bond” that stretched between heaven (An) and earth (Ki). The word *dur*, in turn, signifies “umbilical cord” as well as “bond,” a significant datum in light of the aforementioned traditions from Indonesia and Mesoamerica identifying the *axis mundi* as a “living” rope or umbilicus.⁶⁷ Significantly, the cosmic site associated with this singular event was known as “Where Flesh Came Forth”:

“Not only did the lord make the world appear in its correct form...Enlil, who will make the human seed of the land come [forth] from the [earth]—and not only did he hasten to separate heaven from earth, and hasten to separate earth from heaven, but, in order to make it possible for humans to grow in [Where Flesh Came Forth] (two manuscripts have instead ‘Where Flesh Grew’, the name of a cosmic location) he first suspended the axis of the world at Dur-an-ki.”⁶⁸

As for how we are to understand this “bond” uniting heaven and earth from the standpoint of natural science, scholars have nothing constructive to offer. In a discussion of the difficulty in distinguishing between history and metaphor in these early texts, Françoise Bruschweiler asked the following all-important question:

⁶⁶ L. Cagni, *The Poem of Erra* (Malibu, 1977), p. 32.

⁶⁷ J. Halloran, *Sumerian Lexicon* (Los Angeles, 2006), p. 51.

⁶⁸ J. Black et al, “The Song of the Hoe,” *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* (<http://www-etcs1.orient.ox.ac.uk/>) (Oxford, 1998), lines 1-7. Hereafter *ETCSL*.

“How was that which we regard as myths experienced by peoples who conveyed them and were perhaps their inventors?...The name Duranki, ‘bond between heaven and earth’: is it only a symbolic image or do we have to imagine a time when, in spite of what we think is possible, the Earth was linked with the sky and men kept company with the gods?”⁶⁹

Bruschweiler is one of the few commentators to even pose this seemingly obvious question. That said, no reputable scholar, to the best of my knowledge, has ever seriously entertained the possibility that “heaven” and “earth” were formerly linked by a “bond,” Tree, or ladder. Yet as we will argue, this is not only the most logical explanation for such widespread traditions, it is the one explanation that is consistent with the evidence.

Creation

The Egyptian Pyramid Texts represent the world’s oldest body of religious hymns. Several passages tell of a former age wherein heaven and earth were closer together than at present. One hymn recalls the occasion “when the sky was separated from the earth, when the gods ascended to heaven.”⁷⁰ This memorable event, in turn, was a hallmark of Creation and was associated with a great cataclysm shaking the universe.⁷¹

The sacred literature of ancient India likewise recalls a time when heaven and earth were joined. Thus, the *Aitareya Brahmana* reports that Dyaus and Prithivi, “originally one, were afterwards separated.”⁷²

⁶⁹ F. Bruschweiler, *Inanna la déesse triomphante et vaincue dans la cosmologie sumérienne* (Leuven, 1988), p. 155. Translation by Birgit Liesching.

⁷⁰ 1208 C as quoted in R. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts* (Oxford, 1969), p. 192. See also the discussion in C. Eyre, *The Cannibal Hymn* (Liverpool, 2002), pp. 76-77.

⁷¹ J. Allen, “The Cosmology of the Pyramid Texts,” in J. Allen et al eds., *Religion and Philosophy in Ancient Egypt* (New Haven, 1989), p. 13.

⁷² IV. 4. 27 as quoted by R. Pettazoni, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

In the *Rig Veda*, it is the divine champion Indra who is credited with separating heaven from earth. The following hymn alludes to this heroic feat:

“Indra hath evermore possessed surpassing power: he forced, far from each other, heaven and earth apart.”⁷³

The separation of heaven and earth is said to have occurred shortly after Indra’s birth amidst cataclysmic circumstances:

“Before the High God, at his birth, heaven trembled, earth, many floods and all the precipices. The Strong One [i.e., Indra] bringeth nigh the Bull’s two parents.”⁷⁴

The translator of the *Rig Veda*, Ralph Griffith, offered the following commentary with regards to this passage: “The meaning of the second line is, Indra brings near, but holds apart, the heaven and the earth, the parents of the mighty Sun.”⁷⁵

After separating heaven from earth, Indra comes to serve as a sort of Vedic Atlas, offering the tottering heaven support. The cataclysmic context of Indra’s primeval deeds is explicit, much as in the Egyptian account of the separation of heaven and earth:

“He who, just born, chief God of lofty spirit by power and might became the God’s protector. Before whose breath through greatness of his valor the two worlds trembled, He, O men, is Indra...He who fixed fast and firm the earth that staggered, and set at rest the agitated mountains, Who measured out the air’s wide middle region and gave the heaven support, He, men, is Indra.”⁷⁶

Indra’s role as the support of heaven was much celebrated in Indian ritual. One rite saw the Vedic war-god being identified with a May-pole like structure known as the Indra-

⁷³ X:113:5.

⁷⁴ IV:22:4

⁷⁵ R. Griffith, *The Rig Veda* (New York, 1992), p. 216.

⁷⁶ II:12:1-4

tree. Jan Gonda offered the following summary of this symbolism: “The pole is explicitly identified with Indra himself who in one of the earliest references to these ceremonies (*MBH* 1, 57, 22ff.) is said to have promised his worshippers aid and support.”⁷⁷

That Indra’s tree symbolizes the World Tree, or *axis mundi*, has long been acknowledged. Its mythical prototype, according to Jan Gonda, was to be found in heaven: “It should however be borne in mind that the Indra tree like the sacrificial post (*yupa*) and similar stakes and other objects might be considered a representative of the great cosmic tree, and of the *axis mundi*.”⁷⁸

In a detailed analysis of Indian cosmogonical traditions, Kuiper noted that Indra’s tree was inseparable from the *axis mundi*. The origin of the tree, in turn, could be traced to the events surrounding the separation of heaven and earth:

“This tree belonged to the dual cosmos, since it was identical with the cosmic pillar which, in the center of the world, kept heaven and earth apart. It must accordingly have arisen when the sky was separated from the earth. The obvious conclusion is that Indra, *at the moment* when he ‘propped up’ the sky, must have been identical with the tree.”⁷⁹

The birth of Indra, as we have elsewhere documented, was intimately related to the cataclysmic events recalled as Creation.⁸⁰ Creation itself, as Coomaraswamy and other scholars have documented, involved a forcible “pillaring apart of heaven and earth.”⁸¹ What could the Vedic scribes have had in mind in describing a pillaring apart of heaven and earth? As unusual as these cosmogonical traditions appear at first sight, here, too, strikingly similar traditions are to be found around the globe.

⁷⁷ J. Gonda, “The Indra Festival According to the Atharvavedins,” *JAOS* 87 (1967), p. 414.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 417.

⁷⁹ F. Kuiper, *Ancient Indian Cosmogony* (Leuven, 1983), pp. 12-13.

⁸⁰ E. Cochrane, *Martian Metamorphoses* (Ames, 1997), pp. 81-87.

⁸¹ A. Coomaraswamy, *Symbolism of Indian Architecture* (Jaipur, 1983), p. 47.

In the New World, a Mayan name for the World Tree was *Wakah-Chan*, signifying “raised up sky.”⁸² The Maya, like the Olmecs before them, believed that Creation was marked by the erection of the World Tree, the latter event signaling the separation of heaven and earth: “The classic texts at Palenque tell us that the central axis of the cosmos was called the ‘raised-up sky’ because the First Father had raised it at the beginning of creation in order to separate the sky from the earth.”⁸³

Doubtless it is no coincidence that advanced cultures in the New World as well as the Old report that the erection of the World Tree was coincident with Creation and the separation of heaven and earth.

Similar conceptions are attested in ancient China. In a review of Chinese cosmogonical traditions, John Major points to a “coherent body of myths of great antiquity.” Extrapolating from the findings of Giorgio de Santillana and Hertha von Dechend, Major summarizes the primary motifs as follows:

“The Grand Origin Myth described by de Santillana and von Dechend exists in many local versions, of course, but all share the following essential points: (a) a concept of a time before heaven and earth were separated, when men and gods communicated without hindrance; (b) an *axis mundi*—described variously as a mountain, a tree, or an axle—associated with streams or a whirl-pool draining and recirculating the waters; (c) an account of the destructive drawing apart of heaven and earth, usually associated with (d) the breaking of communication between gods and men, expressed in an expulsion myth. The same cosmic separation produces (e) a catastrophic, world-engulfing flood, finally conquered by a hero who renders the earth fit for renewed habitation, opening the era of human history.”⁸⁴

⁸² D. Freidel, L. Schele, & J. Parker, *Maya Cosmos* (New York, 1993), p. 53.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ J. Major, “Myth and Origins of Chinese Science,” *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 5 (1978), p. 3.

Like de Santillana and von Dechend before him, Major assigns the planets a prominent role in ancient myth. Most significantly, perhaps, Major speculates that the aforementioned mythological motifs date back to Neolithic times:

“Thus it is clear that all of the elements of the Grand Origin Myth described by de Santillana and von Dechend are present in Chinese mythology, and that it is probably more reasonable to accept than to reject the unproven (and perhaps unprovable) hypothesis that those Chinese myths greatly predate their first appearances in texts and indeed describe a cosmological view that goes back to the earliest levels of Chinese culture. This is to say that the ancient Chinese shared a coherent and well-articulated protoscientific world-view that was the common property of Late Neolithic and early Bronze Age peoples throughout the ancient civilized world.”⁸⁵

It will be noted that Major recognizes the central importance of primeval catastrophe in Chinese myth and cosmogony. Yet at no point does he inquire whether there was a historical dimension to the archetypal mythological motifs in question. In this he follows the example set by the authors of *Hamlet's Mill*, who likewise turned a deaf ear to the ancients' explicit testimony vis a vis the catastrophic origins of the present world.

2. Mars and the Ladder to Heaven

“The extermination of the past—by design, by neglect, by good intention—is what characterizes the history of our time.”⁸⁶

Ancient Mesopotamia is commonly regarded as the birthplace of advanced civilization. In addition to inventing writing, Mesopotamian cultures produced some of the world's oldest literature, much of which is known to have had a formative influence on the myths and legends of neighboring cultures. In an epic known as *Nergal and Ereshkigal*, attested from copies dating to the 7th century BCE (Sultantepe) and from the Middle Babylonian period (El-Amarna)—but doubtless reflecting much older traditions—there occurs a curious episode involving a scaling of heaven. In the text in question the war-god Nergal

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁸⁶ T. Judt, *Reappraisals* (New York, 2008), p. 72.

is described as ascending a ladder or stairway to heaven (*simmilat šamâmi*),⁸⁷ ostensibly to reach the assembly of the gods:

“Nergal came up the long stairway of heaven. When he arrived at the gate of Anu, Ellil, and Ea, Anu, Ellil, and Ea saw him and said, ‘The son of Ishtar has come back to us.’”⁸⁸

As a result of climbing the ladder-to-heaven—or perhaps it was because of his impudence in daring to confront the gods in such bold fashion—Nergal is said to have “shrunk” in size and become deformed in some manner (the god is described as “withered,” “crooked,” “bald,” and with wildly rolling eyes).⁸⁹

That this episode formed a central element in Nergal’s mythology is confirmed by the fact that the war-god is linked to the ladder-to-heaven during the Kassite period as well (ca. 1500-1200 BCE). Thus, in a document known as “The Duties and Powers of the Gods,” it is written: “for Nergal, the ‘stairway’? of the underworld, where the Anunnaki draw near...”⁹⁰

An important question confronts us at this point: Why was Nergal renowned for climbing the celestial ladder? In order to answer this question it is instructive to briefly summarize what is known about this particular god.

Nergal

⁸⁷ The phrase *simmilat šamâmi* can signify “ladder of heaven” as well as “stairway of heaven.” See the discussion in A. Oppenheim, “Man and Nature in Mesopotamian Civilization,” in C. Gillispie ed., *Dictionary of Scientific Biography, Vol. 15* (New York, 1978), p. 640.

⁸⁸ Translation from S. Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia* (Oxford, 1991), p. 171. See also the discussion in E. von Weiher, *Der babylonische Gott Nergal* (Berlin, 1971), p. 52; O. Gurney, “The Sultantepe Tablets,” *Anatolian Studies* 10 (1960), pp. 125, 130.

⁸⁹ E. von Weiher, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

⁹⁰ W. Horowitz, *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography* (Winona Lake, 1998), p. 360. The phrase translated here as “stairway” is *kun.sag.kur.ra*, *kun.sag* elsewhere being given as an equivalent to *simmiltu ša gigunê* ‘stairway of a temple-tower’.”

Nergal is best known, perhaps, by virtue of his mention in the Old Testament.⁹¹ The chief god of Kutha, a city in northern Babylonia, Nergal's cult can be traced throughout the entire range of Akkadian influence, from Mari to Babylon to Sumer.⁹² The god's cult is attested in early Sumerian texts and remained strong even in late Babylonian and Parthian times, a period spanning over two thousand years.⁹³

In the past century a wealth of evidence has come to light regarding the god's fundamental nature. Nergal was first and foremost a raging warrior, the god's name occasionally serving as a synonym for war.⁹⁴ Numerous hymns attest to Nergal's prowess as a warrior, of which the following is typical in this regard:

“Warrior! Raging storm-tide, who flattens the lands in upheaval, Warrior! Lord of the Underworld...Raging storm-tide, who has no rival, Who wields the weapon, who raises the troops.”⁹⁵

Inscriptions of Naram-Sin, Hammurabi, Esarhaddon, and Ashurbanipal invoke the god's aid in battle. Witness the following passage from the epilogue of Hammurabi's Law Code: “May Nergal, the strong one among the gods, the fighter without peer, who achieves victory for me, burn his [i.e., the enemy's] people in his great power, like the raging fire of swamp-reeds!”⁹⁶ Hammurabi elsewhere invokes Nergal to insure the efficacy of curses:

“May Nergal, mighty amongst the gods, the warrior whom none can resist, who has fulfilled my eager desire, by his great power consume his people like a fire raging

⁹¹ *II Kings* 17:30.

⁹² E. Weiher, *Der babylonische Gott Nergal* (Berlin, 1971), pp. 25, 37.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

⁹⁵ J. Curtis, “An Investigation of the Mount of Olives in the Judaeo-Christian Tradition,” *HUCA* 28 (1957), p. 156.

⁹⁶ W. Fulco, *The Canaanite God Rešep* (New Haven, 1976), p. 37.

amongst the rushes, may he cleave him asunder with his mighty weapon and shatter his limbs as of a statue of clay.”⁹⁷

Nergal’s belligerent nature knew no bounds. According to one hymn, the god’s wrath threatened the domain of the gods as well:

“O warrior, splendid one...Mighty of arms, broad of chest, perfect one without rival among all the gods, Who grasps the pitiless deluge-weapon, who massacres (?) the enemy, Lion clad in splendor, at the flaring-up of whose fierce brilliance, The gods of the inhabited world took to secret places...”⁹⁸

In addition to his function as a warrior, Nergal was also venerated as a god of the underworld.⁹⁹ Indeed, the ancients understood the god’s name to mean “lord of the underworld.”¹⁰⁰

In the astral religion of ancient Mesopotamia, Nergal was early on identified with the planet Mars. This identification is attested already during the Old-Babylonian period and is apparent in all subsequent periods of the god’s cult.¹⁰¹ The following hymn from Uruk emphasizes the god’s astral nature:

“[O Nergal], warrior of the gods, who possesses the lofty strength of Anu, [Lion] with gaping maw, marauding lion monster, who takes his place nobly in the height of heaven, [Who hold]s lordship, whose features ever glow in heaven...[O Nergal, warrior] of the gods, long of arms, whose divine splendor is sublime in heaven, [Star] ever shining, sublime of features.”¹⁰²

⁹⁷ E. von Weiher, *Der babylonische Gott Nergal* (Berlin, 1971), p. 100.

⁹⁸ B. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* (Bethesda, 2005), p. 706.

⁹⁹ T. Jacobsen, *The Harps That Once...* (New Haven, 1987), p. 170.

¹⁰⁰ E. von Weiher, *op. cit.*, p. 4. See also W. Lambert, “Studies in Nergal,” *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 30:5/6 (1973), p. 356.

¹⁰¹ E. von Weiher, *op. cit.*, p. 76.

¹⁰² B. Foster, *op. cit.*, pp. 708-709.

Astrological omens associate the planet Mars with war, the outbreak of pestilence, and eclipses of the sun. A folk etymology of the planet's name—MUL sal-bat-a-nu—explained it as *mustabarru mutanu*: “(the planet) which spreads plague.”¹⁰³

As we have argued elsewhere, it is our opinion that Nergal's identification with the red planet provides the all-important point of reference for deciphering the curious traditions surrounding this god.¹⁰⁴ This position, it must be admitted, stands in stark contrast to conventional opinion. The majority view, expressed most forcefully by Franz Cumont, regards the anciently attested attributes of the respective planets as myth-based in origin and hence largely arbitrary and nonobjective in nature:

“The qualities and influences which are attributed to them are due sometimes to astronomical motives...But most frequently the reasons assigned are purely mythological.”¹⁰⁵

According to the orthodox view, the connection between Mars and war or an ascent to heaven originated with ancient Babylonian speculations regarding the respective planets and is thus wholly subjective in nature, stemming from the arbitrary identification of the red planet with Nergal. The planet Jupiter, according to this view, might just as easily have been assigned Nergal as regent and thus come to be associated with an ascent to heaven or rulership of the underworld. This is a reasonable position and not to be dismissed out of hand. It is easy to understand, moreover, why scholars would be inclined to accept this explanation of Martian lore as it is very difficult to explain Nergal's peculiar attributes by reference to the red planet's familiar behavior and appearance.

¹⁰³ F. Wiggerman, “Nergal,” *Reallexikon der Assyriologie* 9 (1999), p. 223.

¹⁰⁴ See the discussion in E. Cochrane, *Martian Metamorphoses* (Ames, 1997), pp. 8-18.

¹⁰⁵ F. Cumont, *Astrology and Religion Among the Greeks and Romans* (New York, 1960), p. 66-67.

We would propose the following test: If Nergal/Mars' association with war and/or an ascent to heaven truly stems from the Mesopotamian cult of Nergal and not from the witnessed historical behavior of the red planet, one would hardly expect to find similar reports from the New World. That is, of course, unless one would be willing to entertain the possibility of a diffusion of Babylonian astronomy to the New World, a hypothesis for which there is not a shred of evidence. However, should New World cultures preserve traditions paralleling those from the ancient Near East a *prima facie* case would be made for the thesis defended here, which holds that the characteristic mythological traditions surrounding the respective planets stem from objective astronomical events and observations.

Tales from the Watunna

The *Watunna* is a compendium of sacred lore of the Makiritare Indians, an indigenous tribe living along the Orinoco river in South America (modern Venezuela). It recounts the adventures of the heavenly ancestors in primordial times. Still living in the Stone Age, the Makiritare have remained virtually free from outside influence apart from an occasional visit from a Spanish explorer or anthropologist. Indeed, according to Marc de Civrieux, the anthropologist who first recorded the *Watunna*, "this region of mountains and virgin forest has remained almost unexplored up to this day."¹⁰⁶

Prior to being transcribed by de Civrieux, the *Watunna* had been preserved as an oral tradition for untold millennia, an enduring testament to the power and reliability of human memory:

"This tradition, which the Makiritare call *Watunna*, has been handed down from generation to generation since the beginning of time in a series of magico-religious festivals known as Wanwanna...The *Watunna* is in its essence a secret teaching restricted to the circle of men who undergo the initiations of the Wanwanna festivals."¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ M. de. Civrieux, *Watunna: An Orinoco Creation Cycle* (San Francisco, 1980), p. 1.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

The *Watunna* begins with an account of the idyllic conditions at the dawn of time associated with Creation. During that period a veritable Golden Age prevailed:

“There was Kahuna, the Sky Place. The Kahuhana lived there, just like now...They never died. There was no sickness, no evil, no war. The whole world was Sky. No one worked. No one looked for food. Food was always there, ready...In the highest Sky was Wanadi, just like now. He gave his light to the people, to the Kahuhana...Because of that light, the people were always happy. They had life. They couldn't die. There was no separation between Sky and Earth...Wanadi is like a sun that never sets. It was always day. The Earth was like a part of the sky.”¹⁰⁸

Recognizable here is the familiar belief that, during the Golden Age, heaven and earth were not yet separated. Most significant, however, is the report that “Wanadi is like a sun that never sets.” The ever present and “stationary” Sun is a theme to which we will return in a subsequent chapter.

Among the archetypal mythological themes preserved in this document is an account of a hero's ascent to heaven by means of a ladder formed from a chain of arrows:

“We're going to heaven. Okay. Who'll go? Who'll be first? Who's going with the arrows?” There was another man named Ahishama. He was very wise. ‘Can you?’ Wlaha asked. ‘I'll go,’ Ahishama answered...He turned him into a bird. He was beautiful, brilliant, with orange-colored feathers, and very fast and light. His name was Ahishama, the troupiat [a species of bird]. There was another man. ‘Can you?’ ‘I'll go.’ He turned him into a frog...They called him Kütto...Wlaha shot. The arrow sped out. It flew up. Troupiat flew up. Frog leapt. Wlaha screamed: ‘Fly! Jump! Catch it! Tie it!’ Ahishama was carrying the end of a vine in his beak. We call that vine he had *sahudiwa*, vine-chain. It's a long, long vine, all wrinkled and creased...The seven Wlaha shot another arrow and then another and another. Seven arrows in all. They hung there in

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

space, seven rungs tied to that big vine. It was the ladder, the road to Heaven. That Troupial and that Frog built it. Ahishama and Kütto. They climbed up without a ladder. When they built it there was no road.

They were the first ones to arrive. Right away they changed. They started shining. They were the first two stars in the black night. The very first was Ahishama, then Kütto. Now that Troupial named Ahishama burns orange (Mars). He built the ladder in space. That's what they say."¹⁰⁹

Here, as in Mesopotamia, we find the planet Mars mentioned in connection with an ascent along a celestial ladder, the ladder itself being described as the "road to Heaven." The very origin of the extraterrestrial ladder, moreover, is traced to the red planet. If nothing else, this remarkable tradition bolsters our claim that astronomical imagery informs the ancient myths. How, then, are we to explain the specific content of the Makiritare narrative?

In recent years some scholars have sought to invoke diffusion in order to explain the striking parallels in astral lore to be found in the New World as well as the Old. Linda Schele, arguably the most important Mayanist working in the latter part of the 20th century, offered the following opinion with regard to the intimate link between Maya religion and astronomy:

"It seems that the interaction of astronomy and mythology was common in other cultures as well [as it was among the Maya]. Scholars working in South America have found similar kinds of systems in the Amazon...The Maya may have been using a way of thinking about the sky and using it in their mythology that was very ancient indeed. I'm even prepared to accept that much of the cosmology/mythology came straight across the Bering Strait, and that it may be 10,000 or 15,000 years old; it may be 20,000 years old. I think it may be possible that we have tapped into a very ancient stratum of human thought. If it did come across with the first Americans, then we may be in touch with one

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 113-114.

of the two or three great human intellectual traditions that we as a species have ever evolved, part of the fundamental ‘software’ that all of the peoples of the Americas and Asia have utilized.”¹¹⁰

That there has been significant diffusion of astral lore is impossible to deny. Thus, it is well documented that Babylonian astronomical traditions spread to China, India, and Greece during the period between 500 BCE and 200 AD. Yet diffusion alone will never explain the presence of the Mars-ladder theme in the Amazonian rain forests. Certainly there is no reason to suspect that the Makiritare Mars-lore stems from ancient Mesopotamia itself, for there is no evidence whatsoever to suggest that Babylonian astronomical conceptions made their way to the New World. Diffusion from anywhere in the Old World, in any case, is extremely unlikely given the secluded existence long maintained by these natives of Venezuela. Indeed, the only conceivable way diffusion could account for the remarkable correspondence between the Babylonian and Makiritaran traditions would be for the Paleolithic ancestors of the Makiritare to have carried their version of the Mars-ladder story with them from the Old World (across the Bering Strait, for example). But this particular scenario is also improbable since it would seem to require that the Mesopotamian lore surrounding Nergal stemmed from the same cultural milieu (Siberia?), a supposition for which there is not an iota of evidence.

A more logical hypothesis, in our view, would explain the analogous mythological motifs as the product of common experience—in this case, by commonly witnessed planetary events. The ancient Babylonians, like the Makiritare, linked the red planet with a ladder-to-heaven for the simple reason that that particular planet formerly appeared in close proximity to a giant ladder-like structure spanning heaven.

From the oral traditions of the South American rain forests, we turn to consider the sacred lore from the Australian outback.

¹¹⁰ Quoted in R. Wertime & A. Schuster, “Written in the Stars: Celestial Origin of Maya Creation Myth,” *Archaeology* 46:4 (July/August, 1993), p. 32.

Waijungare

Australia was discovered in the early part of the seventeenth century by Dutch explorers. At the time, it was unknown that a significant population of indigenous peoples occupied the continent, estimated to have then exceeded one million individuals. Once the Aborigines were discovered, it did not take long for the new emigrants to begin a campaign of mass extermination. By the nineteenth century, at which point anthropologists earnestly set about collecting the sacred lore of the respective local tribes, the Aboriginal population had dwindled to some ten thousand individuals. It is simply impossible to estimate the wealth of traditional knowledge lost because of this genocidal holocaust. The few vestiges of astronomical lore that have survived suggest that the loss was very substantial indeed.

Virtually every anthropologist who has spent time with the Australian Aborigines has remarked upon the celestial elements in their art, myths, and rituals. Edward Curr, for example, offered the following observation:

“Many tribes—I believe all—thought that the stars were intimately mixed up with their affairs. Some asserted that certain stars were the dwelling-places of the first fathers of their tribes.”¹¹¹

Interest in astronomical matters extended to the various planets as well. Indeed, it has been claimed that the Aborigines showed a “remarkable interest in the movement of the planets.”¹¹²

Of direct relevance for the present discussion is an intriguing tradition collected from the Yaralde, an aboriginal tribe residing along the lower Murray River in South Australia.

¹¹¹ E. Curr, *The Australian Race, Vol. 1* (Melbourne, 1886), p. 50.

¹¹² H. Cairns, “Aboriginal sky-mapping,” in C. Ruggles ed., *Archaeoastronomy in the 1990's* (Leicestershire, 1993), p. 139, quoting Tindale.

Once upon a time, according to the oral account, a hero named Waijungare threw a spear to heaven which, upon sticking, served as a ladder by which he ascended to heaven:

“Waijungare began to think how he could escape the wrath of his brother, and threw a spear up to the sky, which touched it, and came down again. He then took a barbed spear, and throwing it upwards with all his force, it remained sticking in the sky. By this he climbed up, and the two women after him.”¹¹³

Here one recognizes a variation upon the “chain of arrows” theme. Since the Australian Aborigines did not know the use of bows and arrows, a spear—rather than arrows—served as the means by which heaven was scaled. Most important, however, is the identification of the hero in question: According to the Yeralde, Waijungare was the planet Mars.¹¹⁴

Having now documented traditions of a Martian ascent to heaven in Australia, Asia, and South America, one can begin to appreciate the extent and remarkable durability of this particular myth. Indeed it is safe to say that the myth of Mars’s ascent to heaven is attested on every inhabited continent except Europe and is so widespread as to be global in nature.

Granted the apparent universality of the ladder-to-heaven motif, how are we to explain its origin? Why would disparate cultures around the world describe a primeval ladder-to-heaven along which gods and souls periodically ascended and descended?

¹¹³ J. Wyatt, “Some accounts of the manners and superstitions of the Adelaide and Encounter Bay Tribes,” in J. Woods ed., *The Native Tribes of South Australia* (Adelaide, 1879), p. 201.

¹¹⁴ W. Tindale, “The Legend of Waijungari...,” *Records of the South Australian Museum* 5:3 (1935), pp. 261-274. I am indebted to Dave Talbott for this reference. See his discussion in “Servant of the Sun-God,” *Aeon* 2:1 (1990), pp. 47-48.

Astronomers have speculated that this or that celestial phenomenon inspired these widespread beliefs. Ed Krupp, for example, pointed to the Milky Way as the celestial prototype for the ladder-to-heaven:

“So the Milky Way connects heaven with Earth and provides a path for the journey. Although its light seems faint compared with the focused brilliance of single stars, it is huge. It belts the entire sky and completely embraces the Earth. It moves with a delicate grandeur that suggests that somehow it, too, controls the decorum of heaven and affairs below.”¹¹⁵

That a “Milky Way” in the sky was often compared to a ladder or path leading to heaven is undeniable, although we would deny that the Way in question had anything to do with the band of stars that currently bears that name.¹¹⁶ In any case, it is far from obvious how Krupp’s thesis helps us to understand the unique constellation of motifs attached to the ladder-to-heaven. How are we to account for the traditions reporting that the ladder was destroyed in a primeval cataclysm and is thus no longer available to the respective gods (or souls) in their attempt to scale the Olympian heights? And why would the collapse of the ladder-to-heaven be linked to the end of the world if, as Krupp maintains, the original reference was to the Milky Way? The last time I checked, the Milky Way—like the world itself—was still intact and in perfectly good working order.

Other traditions are equally difficult to reconcile with Krupp’s hypothesis. Why would a ladder centered on the Milky Way be associated with the Sun? How are we to understand the mythical heroes who, in primeval times, made a habit of ascending the ladder? And if shamans have always viewed the Milky Way as a ladder leading to heaven, why is it deemed necessary to magically re-create the idyllic conditions surrounding the prototypical ladder in modern rites? One would assume that modern shamans, like their forebears, could simply mount the familiar Milky Way and climb away. In fact, a

¹¹⁵ E. Krupp, “Negotiating the Highwire of Heaven: The Milky Way and the Itinerary of the Soul,” *Vistas in Astronomy* 39 (1995), p. 413.

¹¹⁶ E. Cochrane, “The Milky Way,” *Aeon* 4:4 (1996), pp. 39-66.

systematic analysis of the various mythological themes associated with the ladder-to-heaven will show that nary a one can be explained by reference to the diffuse band of stars currently known as the Milky Way.

Mircea Eliade offered a slightly more esoteric interpretation of the aforementioned myths and rituals associated with the ladder-to-heaven. It was his view that the symbolic ascents expressed ancient man's desire for absolute freedom:

“What is the meaning of all these shamanic myths of ascent to Heaven...? They all express a break with the universe of daily life. The twofold purpose of this break is obvious: it is the transcendence and the freedom that are obtained, for example, through ascent, flight, invisibility, incombustibility of the body...The desire for absolute freedom—that is, the desire to break the bonds that keep him tied to earth, and to free himself from his limitations—is one of man's essential nostalgias. And the break from plane to plane effected by flight or ascent similarly signifies an act of transcendence;...Indeed, all the myths, rituals, and the legends that we have just reviewed can be translated as the longing to see the human body act after the manner of a spirit, to transmute man's corporeal modality into the spirit's modality.”¹¹⁷

Eliade's hypothesis, like that of Krupp, fails to explain virtually every single mythical tradition associated with the ascent to heaven. Why is the ladder-to-heaven compared to a tree, vine, or rope? Why is the planet Mars identified as the celestial prototype for the ascent to heaven? How are we to understand the cataclysmic elements of the ladder-to-heaven myth—the collapse of the ladder, the concomitant flood, and the departure of the celestial bodies? An explanation that ignores such fundamental elements of the story is no explanation at all.

The ladder-to-heaven itself, according to Eliade, is simply a variation upon the widespread theme of the *axis mundi*. By *axis mundi*, Eliade—following Holmberg—has reference to the World Axis associated with the celestial Pole. Thus, it is well known that

¹¹⁷ M. Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation* (New York, 1958), p. 101.

the North Pole offers the one place where the stars never rise or set but remain ever visible, revolving about the circumpolar region. For the terrestrial skywatcher in the northern hemisphere, the Pole Star forms the “center” of the sky. That is, of course, until precession displaces the Pole star and its stellar neighbors to the point at which they are no longer perpetually visible. Holmberg summarized this idea as follows:

“The regular diurnal movement of the stars round an axis at the North Star, the reasons for which neverending rotation were earlier unknown, gave birth to an idea that their apparent center of the universe was formed by some object which could be represented in concrete forms, and which was, in addition, believed to support the roof of the sky.”¹¹⁸

Holmberg’s hypothesis has a good deal of merit: the *axis mundi* did, in fact, reference a celestial axis in the northern polar regions. But this is only part of the story. How does the hypothesis defended by Holmberg and Eliade help us to understand the origin of the countless stories of a hero’s ascent to heaven along a ladder or tree? Even if it is granted that primitive cultures were cognizant of the abstract (and invisible) axis that extends from Earth to the Pole Star—a most unlikely proposition—it is highly unlikely that virtually every such culture would imagine that an ascent to heaven could occur by means of this ethereal pillar.

It must also be questioned whether it is likely that cultures around the world would localize the transmigration of souls along this same invisible axis, the latter invariably ascribed a tangible form. Is it conceivable that such ideas would occur spontaneously to ancient skywatchers around the globe upon gazing up at the dark region centered on the Pole Star?

Despite the fact that the respective hypotheses of Krupp and Eliade fail to explain the multifaceted traditions associated with the ladder-to-heaven, we can agree that they were

¹¹⁸U. Holmberg, “Finno-Ugric, Siberian Mythology,” in L. Gray ed., *The Mythology of All Races, Vol. IV* (Boston, 1927), p. 333.

right to seek a celestial prototype for such global themes. If not by reference to the familiar Milky Way or polar axis, how, then, are we to understand the ladder-to-heaven?

The Ladder to the Sun

Traditions reporting that ascent along the ladder-to-heaven leads to the house of the Sun are of paramount importance in understanding the mythical motif in question. We have already encountered this belief in South America and analogous traditions will be found around the globe. Thus, a Wasco narrative (Oregon) locates the ladder of arrows near the sun: “A boy shoots arrows up in the air, makes a chain, which he climbs; he then follows a trail which leads him to the Sun’s house.”¹¹⁹

Boas records a similar tradition among the Tsimshian Indians of the Northwest coastal region:

“Two brothers, Kumsla’aqs and Siaxum, go out in their canoe to hunt birds. The second brother is sent to get water; and when he returns, they notice that the sun is low. They shoot their arrows at the sky, form a chain, and shake it. The elder brother climbs up, and when he reaches the sky shakes the chain. Then the younger brother follows. Up above they meet the Sun, who at first is angry, but then welcomes them.”¹²⁰

A Zuni tradition makes the ascent to heaven occur in the context of a great war. There the ascending hero is identified with the “Morning Star”:

“Morning Star, looking on, saw that they were losing the battle. He called to his younger brother and said, ‘Let us go to our sun father and see if he can tell us how to help our friends.’ They took corn meal and turquoise and put it upon their arrows. They shot toward the sun making a road to the sun of the dust. They climbed this.”¹²¹

¹¹⁹ F. Boas, “Tsimshian Mythology,” *ARBAE* 31 (1916), p. 866.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 865.

¹²¹ A. Risser, “Seven Zuni Folk Tales,” *El Palacio* 48 (1941), p. 224.

Here the arrow-chain is described as a “road to the sun,” a phrase which naturally recalls the aforementioned traditions describing the World Tree as the “road to the sky.” Indeed, peoples around the globe claimed that there formerly existed a “road” in heaven that led to a sacred kingdom centered on the sun.¹²² A prime example of this motif appears in “The Gilgamesh Epic,” wherein the Sumerian strongman is said to have followed the “road of Shamash” during his ill-fated attempt to obtain the plant of life.

The idea that the ancient sun-god was formerly associated with a ladder-like structure is surprisingly widespread. With regards to the structure depicted in figure one, the anthropologist Robert Zingg quotes a native Huichol informant to the effect that it “represented the ladder on which the Sun-father came out of the sea when he was born.”¹²³



Figure one

¹²² A. Carnoy, “Iranian Views of Origins,” *Journal of American Oriental Society* 36 (1916), p. 307 writes: “The same ideas are found in the Vedas, and both for the Iranians and Indians there corresponds to the path of the sun the path that man has to follow if he is to reach a successful end.”

¹²³ R. Zingg, *The Huichols: Primitive Artists* (New York, 1938), p. 595.

This Huichol tradition finds a striking parallel in ancient Mesopotamia. There, too, a luminous “staircase” or ladder is mentioned in connection with the ancient sun-god’s epiphany. Witness the following Akkadian hymn:

“Šamaš, you have opened the bolts of the doors of heaven. You have ascended the staircase of pure lapis lazuli.”¹²⁴

The current Sun, needless to say, does not appear in conjunction with a luminous staircase—hence the conundrum presented by such traditions, attested in the New World and Old World alike.

In order to understand the mythological traditions of a ladder associated with the ancient sun-god it is instructive to consider the testimony from ancient rock art. Consider the image from prehistoric California depicted in figure two: Here a ladder-like form extends downwards from a so-called sun image. Inasmuch as this image has no obvious reference in the current skies, scholars might be inclined to overlook its possible relevance to the mythological motif under discussion here. Yet once consider the possibility, however remote, that this image commemorates a former configuration in the sky—one centered on the ancient “sun”—and it is obvious that it illuminates the universal belief in a ladder-to-heaven. If such a configuration was once prominent in the sky, can there be any doubt but that traditions of a ladder leading to the sun would be sure to follow?

¹²⁴ W. Heimpel, “The Sun at Night and the Doors of Heaven,” *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 28:2 (1986), p. 133.

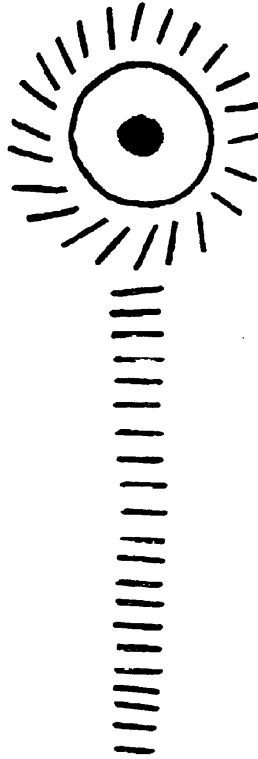


Figure two

Far from being confined to the New World, similar images will be found around the globe. Witness the petroglyphs depicted in figure three. In this scene, carved into a rock face in Yorkshire England, the ladder-like “suns” seem to predominate. Particularly notable is the fact that the English “suns,” like their Californian counterpart, are represented as a circle or disk with a dark dot in the middle. This fact, properly interpreted, suggests that the “sun” in question is not to be confused with the current solar orb (see below).



Figure three

As it turns out, analogous images will be found around the world, being especially common in prehistoric contexts. Yet such artworks have received virtually no attention from students of ancient myth, this despite the fact that they offer a remarkable complement to the aforementioned traditions surrounding the ladder-to-heaven. Indeed, it is our contention that such scenes—however they are to be understood from an astronomical standpoint—represent surprisingly accurate depictions of the ancient sky, a deduction bolstered by the fact that the rock art of different continents betrays amazing correspondences.

The extraordinary profusion of ladder-like forms in prehistoric rock art points to the conclusion that the mythical ladder-to-heaven had reference to a perfectly visible celestial structure, albeit one that has long since disappeared from the polar heavens. This naturally begs the question: How are we to understand this “polar configuration” from an astronomical standpoint?

