

# Samson Revealed

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Ev Cochrane

“The influence of Mars incites a man to do mighty deeds, and to perform works of valour which often terminate in the shedding of blood. It makes him reckless, and gives him an iron will and a bellicose disposition, and prompts him to do deeds of violence and to commit sins, but it often drives him on to victory.”<sup>1</sup>

Who has not been captivated as a youth by the spectacle of Samson slaughtering a thousand Philistine warriors while wielding the jawbone of an ass?<sup>2</sup> Equally thrilling is the image of the Danite strongman renting a lion with his bare hands<sup>3</sup>, or casting off his prisoner’s bonds as if they were waxen flax while in the throes of his furor.<sup>4</sup>

If the routing of the Philistines represents the pinnacle of the hero’s career, his life is elsewhere marked by roguery and sadistic excesses. Included here are the destruction of the Philistine cornfields in the bizarre incident of the burning foxes, which resulted in the death of his wife and father-in-law<sup>5</sup>; the carrying off of the gates of Gaza<sup>6</sup>; and the unprovoked murder of the 30 men from Ashkelon.<sup>7</sup> Such incidents led Frazer to call attention to the glaring incongruities in the Biblical account of Samson:

“Among the grave judges of Israel the burly hero Samson cuts a strange figure...If we accept, as we are bound to do, the scriptural account of this roystering swashbuckler, he never levied a regular war or headed a national insurrection against the Philistines, the oppressors of his people; he merely sallied forth from time to time as a solitary paladin or knight-errant, and mowed them down with the jawbone of an ass or any other equally serviceable weapon that came to hand...If he massacred the Philistines, as he certainly did in great profusion and with hearty good will, it was from no high motive of patriotism or policy, but purely from a personal grudge which he bore them for the wrongs which they had done to himself, to his wife, and to his father-in-law. From first to last his story is that of an utterly selfish and unscrupulous adventurer, swayed by gusts of fitful passion and indifferent to everything but the gratification of his momentary whims. It is only redeemed from the staleness and vulgarity of commonplace rascality by the elements of supernatural strength, headlong valor, and a certain grim humor which together elevate it into a sort of burlesque epic after the manner of Ariosto. But these features, while they lend

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<sup>1</sup>E. Budge, *Amulets and Talismans* (New York, 1968), p. 383.

<sup>2</sup>*Judges* 15:15.

<sup>3</sup>*Judges* 14:6.

<sup>4</sup>*Judges* 15:14.

<sup>5</sup>*Judges* 15:4-6.

<sup>6</sup>*Judges* 16:3.

<sup>7</sup>*Judges* 14:19.

piquancy to the tale of his exploits, hardly lessen the sense of incongruity which we experience on coming across the grotesque figure of this swaggering, hectoring bully side by side with the solemn effigies of saints and heroes in the Pantheon of Israel's history. The truth seems to be that in the extravagance of its colouring the picture of Samson owes more to the brush of the story-teller than to the pen of the historian."<sup>8</sup>

Almost unbelievably, in the same breath Frazer goes on to defend the hero's basic historical nature against those who would make of him a celestial figure:

"The marvelous and diverting incidents of his disreputable career probably floated about loosely as popular tales on the current of oral tradition long before they crystallized around the memory of a real man, a doughty highlander and borderer, a sort of Hebrew Rob Roy, whose choleric temper, dauntless courage, and prodigious bodily strength marked him out as the champion of Israel in many a wild foray across the border into the rich lowlands of Philistia. For there is no sufficient reason to doubt that a firm basis of fact underlies the flimsy and transparent superstructure of fancy in the Samson saga. The particularity with which the scenes of his life, from birth to death, are laid in definite towns and places, speaks strongly in favour of a genuine local tradition, and as strongly against the theory of a solar myth, into which some writers would dissolve the story of the brawny hero."<sup>9</sup>

The mind boggles at this reasoning (or lack thereof). If a real man is to be discerned behind the saga of Samson, one would like to know where? In the incident of the hero's renting the lion with his bare hands? Or the incident of the carrying off of the city gates? Apart from *Judges* and the *Talmud*—where the Danite hero is described as spanning 90 feet (60 ells) between the shoulders, among other things<sup>10</sup>—Samson is nowhere attested in historical sources of any kind. Indeed, it is our opinion that to seek after a mortal Samson would be the height of folly, comparable to seeking a mortal man beneath the lionskin of Heracles, whose various adventures were likewise localized throughout the landscape of ancient Greece as if historical.

### HAMLET'S MILL

As compelling as is the swaggering figure of Samson, it is curious to note the relative dearth of research into his place in comparative mythology. Joseph Campbell's *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, for example, barely mentions him. The same is true of Stephen Langdon's *Semitic Mythology*. Indeed, aside from a handful of books produced around the turn of the century (all under the influence of Muller's solar mythology), it is difficult to point to a reliable, in-depth treatment of the Biblical hero.<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps the most insightful analysis of Samson's career is that offered by Giorgio de Santillana and Hertha von Dechend in *Hamlet's Mill*, a monumental study of the astronomical content of ancient myth and legend. Although *Hamlet's Mill* has languished in obscurity for the better part of three decades since it was first released in 1969, there are signs that the book is experiencing a resurgence of sorts and having an influence on the new generation of archaeoastronomers.<sup>12</sup>

*Hamlet's Mill* is not an easy book to read or digest. For many years now, I have labored over this book, returning to it again and again to mine the many gems contained in what is probably the most extensive collection of astral myth yet produced in the English language. *Hamlet's Mill* is written in an eccentric style that leaps from one

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<sup>8</sup>J. Frazer, *Folklore in the Old Testament* (New York, 1988), pp. 269-270.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 270.

<sup>10</sup>L. Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, Vol. 4 (Philadelphia, 1968), p. 47.

<sup>11</sup>Here the work of Abram Palmer—*The Samson Saga*, originally published in 1913—represents a notable exception. We will have much to say about this book in the following pages.

<sup>12</sup>The following books take their lead from *Hamlet's Mill*: William Sullivan, *The Secret of the Incas* (New York, 1995); and T. Worthen, *The Myth of Replacement* (Tucson, 1991).

theme to another, with nary a hint of how one moves from one to the other. Philip Morrison, in a review<sup>13</sup>, called it a “marvelous and exasperating book,” a very apt description. The classicist F. S. Kirk referred to it as an “imaginative but perverse volume,” while complaining that “there is virtually nothing in the way of cogent argument.”<sup>14</sup>

A central thesis of *Hamlet's Mill* holds that myth encodes astronomical knowledge of great complexity<sup>15</sup>; specifically, an understanding of the precession of the equinoxes, which knowledge the authors suppose was obtained at some point in Neolithic times—presumably in Mesopotamia—and subsequently became diffused throughout the ancient world, including the Americas: “There is good reason to assume that [Hipparchos] actually rediscovered [Precession], that it had been known some thousand years previously, and that on it the Archaic age based its long-range computation of time.” As the astronomer Cecilia Payne-Gaposchkin observed: “By the validity of this statement the edifice will stand or fall.”<sup>16</sup> Kirk’s assessment of this thesis was less kind: “This remarkable and improbable conclusion is presented in language that is mystical and apocalyptic as much as vague and dogmatic...”<sup>17</sup>

The fact that the ancient Babylonians—the greatest astronomers of antiquity—apparently remained ignorant of the phenomenon of precession does not bode well for the thesis of de Santillana and von Dechend.<sup>18</sup> If such is the case, it is most doubtful if a large number of other cultures were aware of it either, yet this is what the thesis of *Hamlet's Mill* requires. In any case, given a thesis this radical in its implications—crediting prehistoric man the world over with a relatively sophisticated understanding of science in general and astronomy in particular—one would think that it was incumbent upon the authors to present a wealth of evidence in favor of such knowledge. Yet such evidence is not to be found in *Hamlet's Mill* (nor anywhere else, I suspect).<sup>19</sup> Rather, the ancient’s knowledge of astronomy is simply taken for granted and the content of the myths interpreted accordingly.

If the authors fail to prove their claim of sophisticated astronomical knowledge prevailing in prehistoric times, they are on much firmer ground in looking to the heavens for the origins of ancient myth. Even Payne-Gaposchkin acknowledges “their point that a keen perception of the heavenly bodies was a factor in the genesis of ancient myth.”<sup>20</sup>

Perhaps the most significant insight of *Hamlet's Mill* is the claim that the central characters of ancient myth are to be identified with the respective planets:

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<sup>13</sup>P. Morrison, *Philip Morrison's Long Look at the Literature* (New York, 1990), p. 46.

<sup>14</sup>F. S. Kirk, “Cultifacts,” *Spectator* 19 (December, 1970), p. 809.

<sup>15</sup>Harald Reiche, a reviewer sympathetic to the authors, said of *Hamlet's Mill* that it sought “to establish concern with astronomical matter of high complexity as a presumptive ingredient of the intellectual background against which mythology must be interpreted. It is this presumption which our authors succeed in converting into a virtual certainty.” “Hamlet’s Mill,” *The Classical Journal* (Oct/November 1973), p. 82.

<sup>16</sup>C. Payne-Gaposchkin, “Myth and Science,” *JHA* 3 (1972), p. 210.

<sup>17</sup>F. Kirk, *op. cit.*, p. 809.

<sup>18</sup>On the Babylonian non-knowledge of the precession, see F. Rochberg-Halton, “The Babylonian Astronomical Diaries: A Review,” *JAOS* 111.2 (1991), p. 326, footnote 30. D. Dicks, *Early Greek Astronomy to Aristotle* (Ithaca, 1985), pp. 70, 170, likewise denies such knowledge to the Babylonians.

<sup>19</sup>Payne-Gaposchkin likewise pointed to the incredible nature of the claim that prehistoric man had already become aware of the precession of the equinoxes. C. Payne-Gaposchkin, “Myth and Science,” *JHA* 3 (1972), pp. 206-211.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 207.

“The real actors on the stage of the universe are very few, if their adventures are many. The most ‘ancient treasure’—in Aristotle’s word—that was left to us by our predecessors of the High and Far-Off Times was the idea that the gods are really stars, and that there are no others. The forces reside in the starry heavens, and all the stories, characters and adventures narrated by mythology concentrate on the active powers among the stars, who are the planets.”<sup>21</sup>

Of the various planets, de Santillana and von Dechend have much to say with respect to the mythology surrounding Saturn and Mars. They were the first to recognize the planet Saturn’s bizarre association with the Pole, for example.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the authors come surprisingly close to anticipating a central tenet of the Saturn-thesis; namely, that a conjunction of various planets played a prominent role in ancient mythology: “The least which can be said, assuredly: Mars was ‘installed’ during a more or less close conjunction of all planets.”<sup>23</sup>

The planet Mars also figures prominently in the chapter on Samson:

“Who could Samson have been? Clearly a god, and a planetary power, for such were the gods of old. As Brave-Swift-Impetuous-Male, as the Nazirite Strong One, he has all the countersigns that belong to Mars, and to none other.”<sup>24</sup>

In *Hamlet’s Mill*, no evidence is presented that Samson was ever identified with the planet Mars by the ancient Israelites themselves (or by modern Jews or Biblical scholars, for that matter). Indeed, it must be said that the evidence presented by de Santillana and von Dechend would hardly stand up in court. Their entire case rests upon a couple of motifs shared in common between Samson and various heroes. Both Samson and the Japanese Susanowo, for example, participate in an episode involving the bringing down of palacial beams. Yet at no time do the authors offer any convincing evidence that Susanowo is to be identified with the red planet, as one might otherwise expect to be necessary in order to make their case.

Just how the authors would understand the archetypal Martian hero is not obvious. The following passage is as specific as the authors get in this regard:

“Here is the story of the Japanese Samson, Susanowo, whose name means Brave-Swift-Impetuous-Male. No better set of attributes for Mars...The hero need no longer masquerade as a boor from the tribe of Dan who raged in Ashkelon and destroyed himself in Gaza.”<sup>25</sup>

The planet Mars, then, according to de Santillana and von Dechend, is to be understood as brave, swift, impetuous, and male. With this portrait we would agree, as would many an astrologer no doubt.<sup>26</sup> Yet the all-important question is how are we to understand the origin of these particular characteristics or the countless others which together form the Martian archetype? At no time do the authors of *Hamlet’s Mill* provide a reliable guide for answering this question.

In the absence of an explicit identification in the ancient literature, it would seem to be necessary to accomplish one of two things in order to make a case that Samson was Mars: (1) document characteristics shared in common between Samson and the planet Mars in ancient tradition; (2) demonstrate specific and unusual parallels between the biblical hero and other gods/heroes securely identified with the red planet.

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<sup>21</sup>G. de Santillana & von Dechend, *op. cit.*, p. 177.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 136.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 157, note 19.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 175-176.

<sup>25</sup>G. de Santillana & von Dechend, *op. cit.*, p. 169.

<sup>26</sup>J. Lewis, *The Astrology Encyclopedia* (London, 1994), p. 350 lists aggression, impulsiveness, combativeness, war, strife, and violence as characteristic of Mars.

We begin our analysis by examining the remarkable similarity which pertains between Samson and the Greek hero Heracles, the latter of whom's identification with the planet Mars was widespread in Hellenistic times.<sup>27</sup>

### HERACLES

That Samson and Heracles bear more than a superficial resemblance to each other has been recognized at least since the time of Eusebius.<sup>28</sup> Nor have modern authors failed to notice the same. Palmer began his study of Samson as follows: "The main object of the present essay is to demonstrate...that, in fact, Samson is the direct heir and representative among the Hebrews, as Herakles was among the Greeks, of the famous Sun-hero Gilgamesh."<sup>29</sup>

As Samson rent the lion with his bare hands, so too did Heracles overcome the Nemean lion without any weapons.<sup>30</sup> As Samson was renowned for his shorning, so too was Heracles rendered bald as a result of his sojourn in the dragon's belly.<sup>31</sup> As Samson was betrayed and ultimately destroyed by Delilah, so does Heracles announce in the *Trachiniae* that: "A woman, a female in no way like a man, she alone without even a sword has brought me down."<sup>32</sup> As Samson bursts the bonds of his Philistine captors, so too does Heracles burst his shackles while in the service of the Pharaoh.<sup>33</sup>

With the episode of Samson's grinding at the mill like a common slave can be compared Heracles' working as slave to Omphale.<sup>34</sup> There, it will be remembered, the Greek strongman operated the spinning wheel. As we will discover, this otherwise bizarre adventure is pregnant with cosmological import.

One might also point to the heroes' peculiar relationship to sacred springs. Here it will be remembered that after the slaughter of the Philistines, Samson was so overcome by fatigue and thirst that he cried out for help. Hearing his plea, God caused a spring to burst out of a nearby rock, which henceforth would be known as "the Spring of the Crier."<sup>35</sup>

One can't help but be reminded here of Heracles' plight at Thermopylae.<sup>36</sup> There Athena is said to have caused a spring to appear in order to refresh the Greek strongman in the wake of some prodigious labor. As was the case with Samson, Heracles is reanimated by the sacred waters. Indeed, Heracles' affinity with sacred springs was so close that he was widely worshipped as the patron of hot springs.<sup>37</sup>

### THE GATES OF GAZA

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<sup>27</sup>Scholia in Apollonius Rhodius III:1378; Pliny *NH* II:34; Hyginus, *Poetica Astronomica* II.42; Serv. *Aen.* VIII:275. See the discussion in W. Roscher, "Planeten," *Ausführliches Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie* (Hildesheim, 1965), col. 2527. A. Scherer, *Gestirnnamen bei den indogermanischen Völkern* (Heidelberg, 1953), pp. 94-95.

<sup>28</sup>See the discussion in Y. Bonnefoy et al, *Mythologies*, Vol. 2 (Chicago, 1991), p. 656. See also H. Steinthal, "The Legend of Samson," in I. Goldhizer, *Mythology Among the Hebrews and Its Historical Development* (London, 1877), pp. 407-410.

<sup>29</sup>A. Palmer, *The Samson Saga* (New York, 1977), p. 18.

<sup>30</sup>O. Margalith, "The Legends of Samson/Heracles," *Vetus Testamentum* 37:1 (1987), p. 67.

<sup>31</sup>O. Margalith, "Samson's Riddle and Samson's Magical Locks," *Vetus Testamentum* 36:2 (1986), p. 233.

<sup>32</sup>Sophocles, 1062-1063.

<sup>33</sup>O. Margalith, *op. cit.*, p. 64, with reference to Apollodorus, II.5.11.

<sup>34</sup>Sophocles, *The Trachiniae*, 253ff.

<sup>35</sup>*Judges* 15:18-19.

<sup>36</sup>See the discussion of A. Palmer, *op. cit.*, pp. 117-118.

<sup>37</sup>Aristophanes, *Nubes* 1051. See also L. Farnell, *Greek Hero Cults and Ideas of Immortality* (Oxford, 1921), pp. 150ff.

“And Samson lay until midnight, and arose at midnight, and took the doors of the gate of the city, and the two posts, and went away with them, bar and all, and put them upon his shoulders, and carried them up to the top of an hill that is before Hebron.” (Judges 16:3)

The episode of Samson carrying the gates of Gaza has long troubled commentators. As Margalith observed, the account in *Judges* is impossible to believe as it stands:

“One of the strangest stories about Samson is the one depicting him carrying the doors of the city-gate with their posts on his shoulders up to the top of a hill ‘that is before Hebron’...This story cannot refer to a real city-gate, as archaeological facts prove. The city-gates of the period that have been excavated consisted of two ‘posts’, huge monoliths dovetailed into the threshold and the lintel which were also huge monoliths, and the whole upper part of the wall rested on them. The doors of the gate turned on bosses protruding top and bottom which fitted into sockets in the threshold and lintel. Thus, in order to remove the two doors intact ‘bar and all’ (xiv 3) one had to lift off the lintel with the whole upper city-wall (usually including a tower) resting on it, and when the posts were removed the whole wall would collapse. Such unrealistic stories are usually aetiological.”<sup>38</sup>

If it is deemed unlikely that the Danite strongman would carry a several ton gate forty miles to Hebron simply to mock his Philistine pursuers, how then are we to interpret this episode? Most scholars, with Palmer, have understood it as having some reference to ancient cosmological conceptions involving the epiphany of the sun:

“The association of Samson here with the two pillars through which he passes to his death, corresponding to the two posts of the gate of the city of night through which he had issued triumphantly (xvi. 3), forcibly reminds us of a scene which is very commonly depicted on the ancient Babylonian cylinders, and must have been well known to the early Hebrews. In these, Shamash, the sun-god, is shown making his exit with flaming streamers (equivalent to Samson’s hair) through the pillars of the gateway of the East, to pass at evening through a similar gateway in the West to the darkness of death.”<sup>39</sup>

As numerous scholars have observed, the gates of Samson find a remarkable parallel in the gates of Heracles, the latter being apparent doublets of the pillars associated with his name. According to Strabo, there were two sets of gates associated with Heracles, one set at the far eastern horizon and the other in the far west.<sup>40</sup> Traditionally located at the “ends of the earth,” Heracles’ gates—as is typical with features of the mythical landscape—eventually became localized at various sites on the margin of the Greek world (from India, to Germany, to Spain).<sup>41</sup>

Perhaps the most commonly cited locales of the hero’s pillars were Tyre and Gades. Herodotus, apparently, thought he had found the hero’s pillars in Tyre. The following is his account of the Tyrian “Heracles”:

“To satisfy my wish to get the best information I possibly could on this subject [the antiquity of Heracles’ worship] I made a voyage to Tyre in Phoenicia, because I had heard that there was a temple there, of great sanctity, dedicated to Heracles. I visited the temple, and found that the offerings which adorned it were numerous and

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<sup>38</sup>O. Margalith, “The Legends of Samson/Heracles,” *Vetus Testamentum* 37:1 (1987), pp. 68-69.

<sup>39</sup>A. Palmer, *op. cit.*, pp. 173-174.

<sup>40</sup>III:5:6

<sup>41</sup>According to Morgenstern, the gates were first located immediately east of Tyre, then moved progressively west, from Gibraltar to Gades to Cape St. Vincent in Portugal. J. Morgenstern, “The King-God Among the Western Semites and the Meaning of Epiphanies,” *Vetus Testamentum* 10 (1960), pp. 146-147. See also the extensive discussion in U. Tackholm, “Tarsis, Tartessos und die Saulen des Herakles,” *Op Rom* 5, 1965, pp. 180-194.

valuable, not the least remarkable being two pillars, one of pure gold, the other of emerald which gleamed in the dark with a strange radiance.”<sup>42</sup>

Apparent in Herodotus’ discussion is the identification of Heracles with the Tyrian god Melqart, widely attested otherwise.<sup>43</sup>

Gades, like Tyre, was a Phoenician colony famous for its worship of Melqart. There, too, could be found a temple of Melqart distinguished by its two pillars, prompting modern scholars to view it as the prototype for the tradition of Heracles’ pillars.<sup>44</sup> Here a tradition reported by Arnobius is of interest: He wrote that Heracles-Melqart traveled to Gades to set up his pillars at the site of the sun-set, whereupon he died.<sup>45</sup> This report, among others, hints at the possibility of a relationship between the traditions surrounding Heracles-Melqart and those involving Samson. Robertson, for example, offered the following observation:

“One of the subsidiary labours of Herakles was the setting up of two pillars at Gades (Cadiz)...Here the cult of Herakles combines with that of his Phoenician double, the Sun-God Melkarth, worshipped at Gades, of whose mythus the Samson legend in the Hebrew Bible is a variant. The two pillars (represented in the Hebrew as in the Phoenician temples) are simply ancient symbol-limits of the course of the sun in the heavens...In the Samson legend they occur twice, figuring in one episode as the gateposts of Gaza which the hero carries off; in another as the two pillars of the Philistine hall, between which the shorn and blinded hero sits in his captivity...Now, just as Samson in one story carries the pillars, so did Herakles, as became his strength, carry his pillars to their places; even as, in the Tyrian form of the legend, he dies at the very place where he has set them up.”<sup>46</sup>

In addition to being early on identified with Heracles, Melqart was also equated with the Akkadian Nergal who, like Heracles, was identified with the planet Mars.<sup>47</sup> Such correspondences suggest that we should trace the gates/pillars associated with Heracles, Melqart, and Samson to the planet Mars, rather than to the sun.

One must also remember Mars’ intimate connection with the World Pillar or axis mundi, the latter thought to support heaven. As scholars have long noted, the tradition of Heracles’ pillars harks back to ancient conceptions of the World Pillar. Cook, for example, offered the following observation: “The pillars of Heracles at one end of the Mediterranean...imply the belief that the sky rests upon solid and tangible supports.”<sup>48</sup> Indeed, Philostratus reported that Heracles’ pillars supported heaven.<sup>49</sup>

In the Western World, the theme of the World Pillar is most familiar in the traditions surrounding Atlas. Of him, Aeschylus wrote: “He in the far western ways stands bearing on his shoulders the mighty pillar of earth and sky.”<sup>50</sup> Homer knew Atlas as “that scanner of the depths of all the sea and upholder of the tall pillars that keep heaven and earth apart.”<sup>51</sup> Hesiod wrote of Atlas that he “supports the broad sky

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<sup>42</sup>Book II:44ff.

<sup>43</sup>W. Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 210.

<sup>44</sup>A. Lloyd, *Herodotus: Book II* (Leiden, 1976), p. 206.

<sup>45</sup>Arnobius I:36.

<sup>46</sup>J. Robertson, *Christianity and Mythology* (London, 1910), p. 368. Robertson’s argument was apparently borrowed from H. Stahn, *Die Simsonsage* (Göttingen, 1908), pp. 57-59, who draws much the same conclusions from the ancient testimony.

<sup>47</sup>E. von Weiher, *Der babylonische Gott Nergal* (Berlin, 1971), p. 76. On the identification of Nergal with Melqart, see S. Dalley, *Myths From Mesopotamia* (Oxford, 1991), p. 164.

<sup>48</sup>A. Cook, *Zeus: A Study in Ancient Religion*, Vol. 2 (New York, 1965), pp. 422-423.

<sup>49</sup>Philostratus as reported by Apollodorus 5:5.

<sup>50</sup>*Prometheus Bound* 356-358.

<sup>51</sup>*Odyssey* I:53ff.

of mighty necessity at the edge of the earth near the clear-voiced Hesperides, supporting it with his head and wearying hands.”<sup>52</sup>

That Heracles was held to have once assumed the burden of Atlas points to his intimate connection with ancient conceptions of the World Pillar.<sup>53</sup> So, too, does his early identification with the Egyptian god Shu who, like Atlas, is likewise described as supporting heaven on his shoulders (See figure X).<sup>54</sup>

In addition to Heracles and Nergal-Melqart, other ancient war-gods identifiable with the red planet were also associated with the World Pillar.<sup>55</sup> The Latin war-god Mars, to take but one of numerous examples, was identified with the Saxon god Irmin who, under the name of Irminsul, was worshipped as the universal column, held to support heaven.<sup>56</sup> Yet the Latin war-god was elsewhere identified with Heracles.<sup>57</sup>

Scholars investigating the origins of sacred symbols have not failed to notice the intimate relation between the red planet and ancient conceptions of the World Pillar. Thus, in *A Dictionary of Symbols*, Cirlot reports that: “The Tree of Life, when it rises no higher than the mountain of Mars...is regarded as a pillar supporting heaven.”<sup>58</sup>

In addition to supporting heaven, the World Pillar/Mountain also served as the site of the epiphany of the ancient sun-god. An early example of this belief can be found in the *Gilgamesh Epic*:

“The name of the mountain is Mashu. As he [Gilgamesh] arrives at the mountain of Mashu, Which every day keeps watch over the rising and setting of the sun, Whose peaks reach as high as the ‘banks of heaven,’ And whose breast reaches down to the underworld, the scorpion-people keep watch at its gate, Those whose radiance is terrifying and whose look is death, Whose frightful splendor overwhelms mountains, Who at the rising and setting of the sun keep watch over the sun.”<sup>59</sup>

Notice here the explicit mention of a gate associated with the Cosmic Mountain. It was through this gate that the sun appeared during its daily cycle.<sup>60</sup> As we have documented elsewhere, the sun-god’s gate is simply the twin peaks of the world mountain (the word Mashu means “twin.”)<sup>61</sup> Thus, as the ancient sun-god customarily appeared between the two peaks of the cosmic mount, so too was it wont to appear between a gate or door. A cylinder seal from Old Babylonian times confirms the intimate relationship between the gate(s) and mountain peaks (see figure x): It shows the gates of the sun-god resting immediately atop the two peaks of the mountain, as if the former were merely extensions of the latter.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>52</sup>Hesiod, *Theogony* 517-520.

<sup>53</sup>Pherecydes in Scholia in Apollonium Rhodium 4.1936 FGH 1, 33.

<sup>54</sup>Plutarch, *Isis and Osiris*, 41. See also the discussion in T. Hopfner, *Plutarch über Isis und Osiris* (Prague, 1940), pp. 23, 185. R. Roeder, “Schow,” *Ausführliches Lexikon der griechischen und römischen Mythologie* (Leipzig, 1884-1937), col. 571.

<sup>55</sup>See the discussion in E. Cochrane, “The Spring of Ares,” *Kronos* XI:3 (1986), pp. 15-21.

<sup>56</sup>See the discussion in E. Polome, “Some Thoughts on the Methodology of Comparative Religion, With Special Focus on Indo-European,” in *Essays in Memory of Karl Kerényi* (Washington, D.C., 1984), p. 16. See also H.R. Davidson, *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe* (Syracuse, 1988), pp. 121-124. J. Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*, Vol. 1 (Gloucester, 1976), pp. 115-119.

<sup>57</sup>Macrobius 3:12:6; Servius *Aen.* 8:275. See also O. Gruppe, “Herakles,” *RE Supplement III* (Stuttgart, 1918), col. 1103.

<sup>58</sup>J. Cirlot, *A Dictionary of Symbols* (New York, 1962), p. 330.

<sup>59</sup>A. Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels* (Chicago, 1949), p. 65.

<sup>60</sup>*Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>61</sup>E. Cochrane, “Mons Veneris,” *Aeon* 4:5 (1996), pp. 64-80.

<sup>62</sup>W. Ward, *The Seal Cylinders of Western Asia* (Washington, 1910), p. 89.



If we are looking for the celestial prototype for Heracles' gates/pillars, one need look no further than these gates associated with the ancient sun-god. Other scholars have arrived at the same conclusion:

"These two sets of Gates of Heracles...were naught but the two cosmic mountains of ancient Semitic mythology...These mountains stood upon the horizon, the one in the east, at the spot where the sun rises, and the other in the west, at the spot where the sun sets."<sup>63</sup>

Palmer, moreover, drew a direct parallel between Mount Mashu and the gates of Heracles and Samson:

"When we find Gilgamesh, in his journeying, arriving at 'the Twin-mountain' (Mashu) in the West, where is the gate of the setting sun, we recognize in these two peaks (masi), through which he has to pass, not only the mythic pillars of Heracles in the far West, but the portals of Gaza through which Samson issues, and the columns through which he goes to his death."<sup>64</sup>

If scholars are agreed that the adventures of Samson, Heracles, and Gilgamesh in conjunction with gates are to be understood in terms of the epiphany of the ancient sun-god, how does all of this relate to the planet Mars?

### **MARS: GATEKEEPER OF THE SUN**

A tablet found in the royal library at Ugarit (KTU 1.78), alternately described as an "astronomical report" or "omen text," tells of some strange goings on in the heavens involving the planet Mars. According to the consensus of leading scholars, the text speaks of the planet Mars in conjunction with an untimely going down of the sun.<sup>65</sup> Sawyer and Stephenson, who were the first to see in the text an early description of a solar eclipse attended by Mars, offered the following translation:

"The Sun went down (in the day time) with Mars in attendance. (This means that) the overlord will be attacked by his vassals."<sup>66</sup>

Here the word translated as "Mars" is Reseph, a West Semitic god of war and pestilence. As the authors note, Reseph's celestial identification seems secure in lieu of his well-attested identification with Nergal in Ugaritic texts.<sup>67</sup> Overlooked by these scholars, but also relevant to Reseph's celestial identification, is the fact that Mars was linked to eclipses in Babylonian astronomical omens as well.<sup>68</sup> Consider the following omen: "If the Sun goes down (by a Darkness/Eclipse) and Mars stands in its place, there will be an Usurpator."<sup>69</sup>

Of paramount importance to our discussion of Samson's gates is the fact that the Ugaritic text describes Reseph-Mars as tgr sps, "gatekeeper of the sun." What can be the meaning of this particular epithet? Sawyer and Stephenson, noting that divine

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<sup>63</sup>J. Morgenstern, "The King-God Among the Western Semites and the Meaning of Epiphanies," *Vetus Testamentum* 10 (1960), pp. 147-148.

<sup>64</sup>A. Palmer, *op. cit.*, p. 224.

<sup>65</sup>J. Sawyer & F. Stephenson, "Literary and Astronomical Evidence for a Total Eclipse of the Sun Observed in Ancient Ugarit on 3 May 1375 B. C.," *BSOAS* 33 (1970), p. 467-489. See also the discussion in T. de Jong & W. van Soldt, "Redating an Early Solar Eclipse Record (KTU 1.78)...," *Jaarbericht Ex Orient Lux* 30 (1987-88), pp. 65-77.

<sup>66</sup>J. Sawyer & F. Stephenson, "Literary and Astronomical Evidence for a Total Eclipse of the Sun Observed in Ancient Ugarit on 3 May 1375 B. C.," *BSOAS* 33 (1970), p. 474.

<sup>67</sup>M. Dahood, "Ancient Semitic Deities in Syria and Palestine," in S. Moscati ed., *Le Antiche Divinita Semitiche* (Rome, 1958), p. 84. W. Fulco, *The Canaanite God Resep* (New Haven, 1976), p. 34-38.

<sup>68</sup>P. Gössmann, *Planetarium Babylonicum* (Rome, 1950), p. 132.

<sup>69</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 82.

attendants frequently accompany the ancient sun-god on Mesopotamian seals, offer the suggestion that the epithet confirms Mars' close proximity to the sun during the event in question. De Jong and von Soldt, in a recent re-analysis of this text, passed over the epithet in silence, noting only that Mars "cannot have been too far from the sun" at the time of the eclipse.<sup>70</sup>

Yet as Sawyer and Stephenson point out, Mars is typically faint when near the sun and never visible until after sunset.<sup>71</sup> Thus, it is most unlikely that Mars would come to be viewed as an attendant of the sun under such circumstances. Nor would Mars' appearance near the sun during an eclipse be of much help in explaining the origin of the epithet, being much too rare an occurrence. And an attendant, in any case, is hardly the same thing as a "gate-keeper", inasmuch as the latter naturally requires that there be a gate to keep. But where is a gate to be found in the immediate vicinity of the sun?

It is our opinion that Reseph's epithet did not originate as a generic term for "attendant" of the sun, as per the thesis of Sawyer and Stephenson; rather, we would view the phrase "gate-keeper" as an anachronism, commemorating Mars' intimate relation to the "gates" of the ancient sun-god in a former age. Support for this opinion can be gleaned from the fact that various gods identified with Reseph share a similar epithet. The Greek Apollo, for example, identified with Reseph as early as the fourth century BC, was also known as the "gatekeeper" of Olympus. Witness also the epithet *Propylaios*, "Before the gate," applied to Apollo. Images of Apollo, in conformance with his role as gatekeeper, were typically placed before the gates of Greek cities, ostensibly to protect against plague.<sup>72</sup>

The very same function was also ascribed to Heracles. Callimachus, with reference to Zeus' celestial residence, reports that Heracles replaced Apollo as the gatekeeper of Olympus and that the Greek strongman "stands ever before the gates."<sup>73</sup> Heracles appeared as a "gatekeeper" in Greek ritual as well, where he is described as ushering in the day and closing the night.<sup>74</sup> In Hellenistic times, moreover, Heracles was identified with Reseph, presumably because of their mutual association with the planet Mars.<sup>75</sup>

Mars' intimate association with celestial gates, obvious in the epithet associated with Reseph/Mars but apparent also in the peculiar traditions linking Samson, Heracles, Gilgamesh and Apollo to celestial gates, is but one of hundreds of mythical themes which will never be explained by reference to the current solar system. Indeed, it is our opinion that Mars' peculiar role as "gatekeeper" can only be understood by reference to a lost solar system, one known to the readers of Aeon as the polar configuration. Rather than offer here yet another summary of the Saturn-thesis, I will simply refer the readers to figure X, which shows the polar configuration as reconstructed by Talbott, Cardona, and myself. Here the ancient sun-god, identified as the planet Saturn, is associated with a polar column. It is this column which provided the celestial prototype for the World Pillar. The crescent at the apex of the column, in addition to forming the objective form behind the twin-peaks of the polar mountain, served also as the gate of

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<sup>70</sup>De Jong & von Soldt, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

<sup>71</sup>J. Sawyer & F. Stephenson, *op. cit.*, p. 469.

<sup>72</sup>C. Faraone, *Talismans and Trojan Horses* (New York, 1992), pp. 7, 60.

<sup>73</sup>Callimachus, *Hymn to Artemis* 145ff.

<sup>74</sup>Pausanias IX:19:5. On the island of Thasos, Heracles was represented as a kneeling archer on the city gate and invoked as "Guardian of the city." See the discussion in B. Bergquist, *Herakles on Thasos* (Uppsala, 1973), p. 36.

<sup>75</sup>W. Fulco, *op. cit.*, p. 38. See also W. K. S., "Reschef," *Reallexikon der Agyptologie* Vol. 4 (Berlin, 1977), p. 244.

the ancient sun-god. The revolution of this gate, it can be shown, was intimately related to the primeval cycle of day and night.<sup>76</sup>

As we have documented, the position of Mars with respect to the polar column fluctuated with the evolution of the polar configuration, the red planet alternately appearing as a tiny orb set within the center of Venus and as a giant orb beneath the outlines of Saturn. It is the latter scenario which inspired the conception of the Martian hero upholding the heavens with his upraised arms, the hero's arms being strictly synonymous with the recumbent crescent.<sup>77</sup> It is probable that this placement of Mars also accounts for the epithet "gatekeeper of the sun," as the recumbent crescent formed the gate of heaven, before which stood the hero.

### THE BLIND STRONGMAN

"But the Philistines took him, and put out his eyes, and brought him down to Gaza, and bound him with fetters of brass; and he did grind in the prison house." (Judges 16:21)

A defining characteristic of Samson is that he was blinded. As we have elsewhere documented, there is no shortage of blind heroes, several of whom offer intriguing parallels to the Biblical Samson.<sup>78</sup> Here one might point to the Norse hero Hoder, a blind god renowned for his tremendous strength. Saxo describes the youthful hero as follows: "While a stripling, he excelled in strength of body all his foster-brethren and compeers."<sup>79</sup> Although Saxo depicts Hoder as an historical figure and in a relatively positive light, a dark pall hangs over the hero's name in more ancient accounts. Snorri may be cited here:

"Höd is one of the gods. He is blind. He is immensely strong too, but the gods would rather there were no need to mention his name, since his handiwork will long be remembered amongst gods and men."<sup>80</sup>

Like Heracles, Lykurgos and various other heroes, Hoder is said to have assaulted the gods themselves, on one occasion putting them to flight.<sup>81</sup> Yet it is his role in the death of the beloved god Balder which earned the warrior-hero eternal infamy. Snorri describes the former god as follows:

"Another son of Odin's is called Baldr, and there is [nothing but] good to be told of him. He is the best of them and everyone sings his praises. He is so fair of face and bright that a splendour radiates from him...He is the wisest of the gods...He lives in a place in heaven called Breidablik; nothing impure can be there."<sup>82</sup>

Tricked by Loki, Hoder killed Balder by firing a missile made of mistletoe within the confines of a sacred assembly-ground:

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<sup>76</sup>In a future article, I hope to expand upon this theme. Here I would only cite the otherwise enigmatic words of Hesiod: "In the region where the entrance to Hades lies, Day and Night share the same house, but are never there at the same time, since one leaves as the other returns, to wait indoors her turn to circle the earth. At the gate they greet each other, as they cross the threshold of bronze." *Theogony* 720ff.

<sup>77</sup>In the *Pyramid Texts*, for example, one can read that Shu's "arms which are under the sky are upraised." (1471)

<sup>78</sup>The blind hero, frequently a great sinner against the gods, is a universal mythological figure. In addition to Hoder and Samson, one might cite Lykurgos, Keresaspa, Oedipus, Paris, and Bellerophon. See E. Cochrane, *Martian Metamorphoses* (Ames, 1997), forthcoming.

<sup>79</sup>Saxo Grammaticus, *The Danish History*, Vol. I (London, 1905), p. 177.

<sup>80</sup>Quoted from G. Dumézil, *Gods of the Ancient Northmen* (Berkeley, 1973), p. 59.

<sup>81</sup>This tradition is alluded to by various authors, including Saxo. See *The Danish History*, Vol. I (London, 1905), p. 184.

<sup>82</sup>Quoted from G. Dumézil, *op. cit.*, p. 59.

“Now Höd was standing on the outer edge of the circle of men because he was blind. Loki asked him: ‘Why aren’t you throwing darts at Baldr?’ He replied: ‘Because I can’t see where Baldr is, and, another thing, I have no weapon.’ Then Loki said: ‘You go and do as the others are doing and show Baldr honour like the other men. I will show you where he is standing: throw this twig at him.’ Höd took the mistletoe and aimed at Baldr as directed by Loki. The dart went straight through him and he fell dead to the ground. This was the greatest misfortune ever to befall gods and men.”<sup>83</sup>

If we are to judge by the popularity of his name, Hoder was worshipped by various Teutonic peoples. As Grimm observed, the etymology of the god’s name marks him as a warrior *par excellence*, being related to various words signifying *belli impetus* and fervor:

“In these words, except where the meaning is merely intensified, the prevailing idea is plainly that of battle and strife, and the god or hero must have been thought of and honored as a warrior. Therefore [Hödr]...expressed phenomena of war; and he was imagined blind, because he dealt out at random good hap and ill.”<sup>84</sup>

Among the numerous puzzles presented by Hoder, none is greater than his appearance as a great judge. This apparent incongruity in the ancient traditions prompted the following observation from Rydberg:

“Hoder, who both in name and character appears to be a most violent and thoughtless person, seems to be the one least qualified for this calling (peace-judge). Nevertheless he performed the duties of an arbiter by the side of Balder and probably under his influence. Saxo speaks of him as judge.”<sup>85</sup>

As disconcerting as is the image of the Scandinavian strongman as peace-judge, it offers a striking parallel to Samson’s function in Israelite tradition. Of Samson’s status as judge, Frazer offered the following quip:

“Among the grave judges of Israel the burly hero Samson cuts a strange figure. That he judged Israel for twenty years we are indeed informed by the sacred writer, but of the judgments which he delivered in his judicial character not one has been recorded, and if the tenor of his pronouncements can be inferred from the nature of his acts, we may be allowed to doubt whether he particularly adorned the bench of justice.”<sup>86</sup>

Here, too, the bizarre association of the warrior-hero with judgeship—far from muddying the waters—conforms to an archetypal pattern. Gilgamesh for example, was revered as a judge. An ancient text invokes the Sumerian hero as follows:

“Gilgamesh, perfect king, [judge of the Annunaki], wise prince...ruler of the earth...Thou art the judge, like a god who perceivest (everything). Thou standest in the underworld (and) givest final decision. Thy judgment is not changed, [thy] word is not forgotten.”<sup>87</sup>

Judgeship is also associated with many of the gods we have identified as personifications of the planet Mars. Nergal, like Gilgamesh, was represented as the judge of the underworld.<sup>88</sup> Dedications to the Latin war-god found in ancient Germanic regions invoke him as Mars *Thingsus*, god of the judicial assembly.<sup>89</sup> The temple of

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<sup>83</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>84</sup>J. Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology* Vol. 1 (Gloucester, 1976), p. 223.

<sup>85</sup>V. Rydberg, *Teutonic Mythology*, Vol. 3 (London, 1907), p. 889.

<sup>86</sup>J. Frazer, *Folklore in the Old Testament* (New York, 1988), p. 269.

<sup>87</sup>A. Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels* (Chicago, 1970), p. 5.

<sup>88</sup>E. von Weiher, *Der babylonische Gott Nergal* (Berlin, 1971), pp. 20-21.

<sup>89</sup>G. Turville-Petrie, *Myth and Religion of the North* (London, 1964), p. 181. See also the discussion of G. Dumézil, *Mitra-Varuna* (New York, 1988), pp. 125-126.

Apollo *Lykeios* at Athens, likewise, originally served as a court of law.<sup>90</sup> Consider also the intimate association of the Greek war-god with the Areopagus, “the hill of Ares” near the Athenian Acropolis upon which was held the highest judicial court.<sup>91</sup> In Egyptian tradition, it was Shu who presided over the court of justice, known as the Ennead.<sup>92</sup>

The same theme is associated with the red planet in folklore. In Babylon, for example, the planet Mars was invoked as the “star of judgment of the fate of the dead.”<sup>93</sup> Similar ideas prevailed in China, where Mars was known as “Bringer of Justice” and represented as a judge.<sup>94</sup>

### SAMSON’S FUROR

“Then three thousand men of Judah went to the top of the rock of Etam, and said to Samson...We are come down to bind thee, that we may deliver thee into the hand of the Philistines...And they bound him with two new cords, and brought him up from the rock. And when he came unto Lehi, the Philistines shouted against him: and the spirit of the Lord came mightily upon him, and the cords that were upon his arms became as flax that was burnt with fire, and his bands loosed from off his hands.”

This is but one of four occasions in *Judges* wherein Samson is overcome by an external “spirit,” inspiring him to stupendous feats of strength. As Palmer remarks, the notion that the spirit of Yahweh assailed Samson or otherwise fell upon him “seems to convey the idea of a violent access or on-coming of feelings which he was unable to resist.”<sup>95</sup> That scholar, among others, compared Samson’s furor to that associated with the berserkers in Norse lore.

In his *Antiquities*, Josephus provided a summary of Samson’s career. There he listed “fury” as one of the hero’s four primary attributes.<sup>96</sup> According to the Biblical account, Samson’s furor was distinguished by a “hot anger” and “shaking.”<sup>97</sup> Bizarre as this sounds, it does have striking parallels in the traditions surrounding other heroes. The Celtic Cuchulainn, for example, was renowned for the furor which would periodically overtake him, compelling him to extraordinary feats of valor and strength. On one occasion, the hero performed the proverbial “hero’s salmon-leap,” which propelled him across the bridge of the Scathach’s netherworld kingdom.<sup>98</sup> On another occasion, the heat engendered by the hero’s furor is said to have melted the snow around him for a distance of thirty feet.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>90</sup>Pausanias I:19:3. See also D. Gershenson, *Apollo the Wolf-god* (McLean, 1991), p. 11.

<sup>91</sup>Aeschylus, *Eumenides* 681ff. “Here to all time for Aegeus’ Attic host Shall stand this council-court of judges sworn, Here the tribunal, set on Ares’ Hill.”

<sup>92</sup>Various passages in the *Coffin Texts* celebrate this aspect of the god: “I judge the entourage who are about the shrine.” See CT 1:391.

<sup>93</sup>Quoted from S. Langdon, “Semitic Mythology,” in *The Mythology of All Races*, ed. L. Gray (New York, 1964), p. 147.

<sup>94</sup>G. Schlegel, *Uranographie Chinoise* (La Haye, 1875), p. 627.

<sup>95</sup>A. Palmer, *op. cit.*, pp. 66-67.

<sup>96</sup>See also the discussion in L. Feldman, “Josephus’ Version of Samson,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 19:2 (1988), p. 188.

<sup>97</sup>*Judges* 16:20ff.

<sup>98</sup>E. Hull, “The Wooing of Emer,” in *The Cuchullin Saga in Irish Literature* (London, 1898), p. 75. This episode is closely paralleled by the leap of Finn across the threshold of the Queen of the netherworld in Gaelic tradition. See J. Nagy, *The Wisdom of the Outlaw: The Boyhood Deeds of Finn in Gaelic Narrative Tradition* (Berkeley, 1985), p. 133.

<sup>99</sup>E. Hull, “Tain Bo Cuailgne,” *The Cuchullin Saga in Irish Literature* (London, 1898), p. 160.

In addition to the generation of intense heat, it was reported that while undergoing his furor Cuchulainn “became crimson all over,” shook violently, and assumed a gigantic form. The epithet *Riastradh*, “The Distorted One,” commemorates the radical distortion of features which distinguished the Celtic hero at such times. The *Tain Bo Cuailgne* describes the hero’s furor as follows: “It was then that, as before, Cuchullin’s distortion came on, and he was filled with swelling and great fulness, like breath in a bladder, until he became a terrible, fearful, many-colored, wonderful Tuaig (giant).”<sup>100</sup>

Yet if the hero’s furor aided him in the defense of the Irish borders, it also inspired him to commit numerous excesses, the frenzied slaughter of hundreds of men accompanying such outbursts on more than one occasion. A leading scholar of Celtic lore offered the following observation: “Now when Cuchulainn was distorted with anger and battlefury, he became gigantic in size, and made no distinction between friends or foes, but felled all before and behind equally.”<sup>101</sup>

How are we to understand such peculiar traditions? Why would Celtic bards associate Cuchulainn—otherwise regarded as the very “model of human conduct”<sup>102</sup>—with indiscriminate slaughter? And what is the objective basis for the bizarre furor which distinguished the youthful hero?

If we are to hold true to our thesis that the warrior-hero represents the planet Mars, we must seek the explanation of his strange furor in the ancient appearance of that planet. The emphasis on Cuchulainn’s crimson color, explicitly coupled with the ability to swell and assume a gigantic form, must recall the sudden swelling of the ruddy-colored Indra. As we have documented, this swelling appears to represent an archetypal motif associated with the warrior-hero and is also attested in the lore surrounding the red planet.<sup>103</sup>

Recall further that it is in the cults of such gods as the Akkadian Erra/Nergal, Greek Ares, and Latin Mars that one meets with this strange berserker-like furor, where death is dealt out with an indiscriminate zest. In the *Poem of Erra*, for example, the god himself is made to announce:

“Like a scorcher of the earth, I slew indiscriminately good and evil. One would not snatch a carcass from the jaws of a ravening lion, So too no one can reason where one is in a frenzy.”<sup>104</sup>

Ares, the god inherent in the savagery of war and battle, was invoked by Homer as “the manslaughtering, bloodstained stormer of walls.”<sup>105</sup> Ares’ demeanor was typically described by such epithets as *lyssa*, signifying “martial rage, raving, frenzy,” and *mania*, signifying “madness, frenzy.”<sup>106</sup> His propensity for fighting first for one side, then for the other, earned him the epithet *alloprosallos*, “fickle.”<sup>107</sup>

The Vedic war-god was likewise accorded a capricious nature, given to dealing out death and destruction at random. Oertel enumerates various examples of Indra’s bad faith, noting that the *Rig Veda* ascribed a fickle nature to the war-god: “It seems evident

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<sup>100</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 193.

<sup>101</sup>J. Rhys, *Lectures on the Origin and Growth of Religion as Illustrated by Celtic Heathendom* (London, 1898), p. 439

<sup>102</sup>M. Sjoestedt, *Gods and Heroes of the Celts* (Berkeley, 1982), p. 91.

<sup>103</sup>See the discussion in E. Cochrane, “Indra: A Case Study in Comparative Mythology,” *Aeon* 2:4 (1991), pp. 64-71.

<sup>104</sup>Translated in B. Foster, *From Distant Days: Myths, Tales, and Poetry of Ancient Mesopotamia* (Bethesda, 1995), pp. 160-161.

<sup>105</sup>*Iliad* 5:31

<sup>106</sup>Sauer, “Ares,” *RE* (Stuttgart, 1893-1940), col. 658. See also H. Liddell & R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford, 1951), pp. 909, 920.

<sup>107</sup>*Iliad* 5:831, 889. See also H. Liddell & R. Scott, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

that such legends as these form the background for an occasional general allusion to Indra's fickleness like RV 6, 47, 16; 17... 'wont to help on now the one now the other... he turneth away from his old friends and, changing, goeth with new ones.'"<sup>108</sup>

Nor is it without interest, given our identification of Indra with the red planet, that Mars was ascribed a fickle nature and fiery temperament in Indian astronomical lore.<sup>109</sup>

The Latin god Mars was virtually synonymous with the rage and fury of war. A frequent epithet coupled with Mars is *saevio*, "to rage, be fierce, vent one's rage."<sup>110</sup> Yet as Dumezil observed, it is the epithet *caecus*, "blind," which best captures the essence of the god:

"The ambiguous character of Mars, when he breaks loose on the field of battle, accounts for the epithet *caecus* given him by the poets. At a certain stage of furor, he abandons himself to his nature, destroying friend as well as foe... By virtue of these very qualities of furor and harshness, Mars is the surest bulwark of Rome against every aggressor."<sup>111</sup>

It is doubtless no coincidence that this description of Mars is equally applicable to the Celtic Cuchulainn. Thus, an ancient kenning preserved the epithet "Cuchulainn the Blind."<sup>112</sup>

Fundamental to the blindness accorded the Latin war-god and Celtic hero—indeed to the concept of blind rage itself, which so often characterizes the rampage of the warrior-hero—is the fact that the planet Mars itself was deemed to be blind. De Santillana and von Dechend drew attention to this particular point in *Hamlet's Mill*:

"There is a peculiar blind aspect to Mars, insisted on in both Harranian and Mexican myths. It is even echoed in Vergil: '*caeco Marte*'."<sup>113</sup>

**TO BE CONTINUED**

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<sup>108</sup>H. Oertel, "Brahmana Literature," *JAOS* 19 (1897), pp. 119-120.

<sup>109</sup>S. Markel, *Origins of the Indian Planetary Deities* (Lewiston, 1995), p. 186. There, Markel cites Santhanam, *Brihat Parasara Hora*, 1:31-33 to the following effect: "Mars has blood-red eyes, is fickle-minded... given to anger..."

<sup>110</sup>F. Leverett, *Lexikon of the Latin Language* (Boston, 1850), p. 789.

<sup>111</sup>G. Dumezil, *Archaic Roman Religion*, Vol. 1 (Chicago, 1970), p. 229.

<sup>112</sup>E. Hull, *The Cuchullin Saga in Irish Literature* (London, 1898), p. 93.

<sup>113</sup>G. de Santillana and H. von Dechend, *Hamlet's Mill* (Boston, 1977), p. 176.