

The Natsarene and hidden gnosis

by

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**The Old Arabian Moon Religion
and the Mosaic Tradition**
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Foreword

This lengthy Addendum follows the third installment (Chapters 3–4) of my translation from the German of Ditlef Nielsen’s book, *The Old Arabian Moon Religion and the Mosaic Tradition* (1904). It is conceived to be read in conjunction with Nielsen’s groundbreaking work, for the German explores a number of still novel themes which are foundational to my thought, such as: the influence of North Arabian religion on early Israelite origins, and in turn on Christianity; the gnostic nature of the religion of Midian, where Moses allegedly sojourned and learned from Jethro; and the gnostic character of the most ancient Israelite religion.

The terms *Nazarene* and *Nazoraean*, familiar from the Christian gospels, continue to present enigmas. In the Addendum, I show that these terms reflect the Semitic *n-ts-r* (nun-tsade-resh), a root with specifically gnostic connotations going back to the Bronze Age. The dictionary tells us that Hebrew *natsar* means “watch, preserve, guard.” Its cognates in related Semitic languages also signify “secret knowledge” and “hidden things.” Each of these meanings is a potent concept in the various gnostic religions of all eras, and these significations are known in history at least as far back as the “time of Noah”—that is, before 2,000 BCE when the flood story was first created.

The publication of my 2008 book, *The Myth of Nazareth: The Invented Town of Jesus*, has challenged the all too facile assumption that *Nazarene* in the New Testament means “from Nazareth.” As a result, new attention is now being placed on the enigmatic term. For perhaps the first time, we can now see that *Natsarene* (or a close cognate, with Semitic *tsade*) was widely used in early Middle Eastern religions to designate the person of advanced spirituality, a spirituality linked to hidden gnosis. Hence the title of the Addendum, “The Natsarene and hidden gnosis.”

A discussion of hidden gnosis inevitably introduces unfamiliar symbols. Common terms like water, the well, the gate, the underworld, and the serpent take on unexpected meanings as metaphors, as do “places” such as *Bethlehem* and *Ephrathah*. Ancient man was much more at home in the spiritual world of gnosticism than is man today, immersed as we are in “the deep sleep of materiality.”

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(July, 2011)

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Character list

'	= "a"	(Heb. <i>alef</i>)
'	= (stop)	(Heb. <i>ayin</i>)
Ĥ, ĥ	= "ch"	(Heb. <i>het</i>)
Ş, ş	= "ts"	(Heb. <i>tsade</i>)
Ŝ ŝ	= "sh"	(Heb. <i>shin</i>)
ţ	= "th"	(Heb. <i>tav</i>)

Long vowels are marked by a superscript macron.

The Natsarene and hidden gnosis

In Mesopotamian cuneiform texts of the second millennium BCE—the oldest stratum of Semitic usage—*našāru* has a wide complex of meanings. They include: (1) be watchful, alert, on guard; (2) restrain, control; (3) keep secrets; and (4) preserve, keep, observe.¹ The root is *n-ts-r*, in Hebrew nun-tsade-resh (נצר). From this root we must also seek the derivation of the Greek ναζαρηνοϛ, found in the New Testament (Gospel of Mark), and also of its cognates ναζωραιοϛ (Gospel of Matthew), the intermediate form ναζαρα (“Q”), and finally the name of the village from which Jesus ostensibly hailed, ναζαρεθ. For a number of reasons, it has generally been acknowledged that the latter does not derive from the Semitic name of the village, נצרת (“Natsareth”).²

From the Semitic root *n-ts-r* also derives the Mandaean *Našuraia* (pl. *-aiia*):

[T]hose amongst the community who possess secret knowledge are called *Našuraiia*—Nazoreaeans... At the same time the ignorant, or semi-ignorant laity are called ‘Mandaeans,’ *Mandaiia*—‘gnostics.’

(E. Drower p. IX.)

Miss Drower writes elsewhere that the *Našuraiia* are those “skilled in esoteric knowledge.”³ On account of that esoteric knowledge Mandeism is known as a gnostic religion.

Being “watchful,” “on guard,” and spiritually “awake” are recurring themes in Near Eastern religion going back at least to Sumerian times. The Mesopotamian and Hebrew usages of *natsar* are comparable, with the exception that the esoteric or hidden dimension known in the former is muted in Jewish scripture.⁴ This is not surprising, for secret knowledge—especially that leading to ‘gnosis’ (man’s apperception of the transcendent or of the divine)—has never been acceptable to normative Judaism.

Natsar is frequently encountered in Jewish scripture—often accompanied by its synonym *shamar*, “watch” (from whence the *Samaritans*, also “watchers”). Watchfulness, of course, protects against the element of surprise, and Yahweh’s actions come ‘suddenly’ to those who are not prepared. His actions are punishments, judgments upon the wicked. Yahweh appears unexpectedly (Mal 3:1); he suddenly

¹ CAD vol. 11, p. 33 ff. (*našāru*).

² The traditional derivation is problematic on several counts. Linguistically, the Semitic tsade (voiceless) does not complement the Greek zeta (voiced). Hebrew tsade generally (though not always) yields Greek sigma. Literary problems also attend a derivation of *Nazarene/Nazorean* from *Natsareth/Nazareth*, e.g., Acts 24:5, where Paul is called “a ringleader of the sect of Nazoreans”—hardly understandable if “Nazorean” derives from a mere village. Finally, there is the weighty archaeological problem, namely, that Nazareth did not exist in the putative time of “Jesus,” that is, at the turn of the era (Salm, *The Myth of Nazareth*, 2008).

³ Drower and Macuch, 285.

⁴ *Natsar* has the connotation of secrecy in only a few OT passages (Is 48:6; 65:4; Pr 7:10). Cf. BDB 666.

metes out retribution to his enemies (Isa 48:3; Pr 24:22); and similar *quick* retribution awaits those who oppose the will of the Israelites, Yahweh's servants (Jer 18:22; 49:19; 50:44; 51:8). Most frequently, however, unexpected and sudden disaster awaits those who are guilty of moral turpitude (Isa 47:11; Job 22:10; Jer 4:20, 6:26, 15:8; Pr 3:25; 6:15; 29:1; Hab 2:7).⁵ In these passages, the focus is not on the destructive action itself so much as on the perception of that action—the divine judgment occurs *when least expected*. This experiential aspect of “surprise” is carefully delineated in Jewish scripture:

Disaster shall fall upon you, which you will not be able to ward off;
And ruin shall come on you suddenly, of which you *know* nothing.
(Isa 47:11, emphasis added.)

The key here is knowledge into the ways of the divine. The wise person knows, and thus the action of the divine does not catch him off guard. He avoids ruin because he is watchful, and his watchfulness lends him insight unseen by his peers—*gnosis*.

Noah, the first Natsarene

In the flood story, secret knowledge protects the wise person against that which destroys the entire world. The flood was a divine judgment upon all mankind, one which came suddenly. But god gave Noah secret knowledge in advance: to build an ark. The ark itself represents and symbolizes the secret saving knowledge of god. After all, it was the ark that saved Noah. Thus it is no surprise that in the Akkadian flood story the boat is named *Natsirat Napishtim*, “Preserver of Life,” a phrase employing the root *n-ts-r*.⁶

It should also not surprise us that *netsēru* in Akkadian means “secret knowledge,” particularly that received from the moon god Ea/Enki.⁷

The ark came to rest on the very top of Mt. Nitsir—also from the root *n-ts-r*. Given the etymology of the name, Mt. Nitsir represents the saving knowledge of god, the “secret knowledge” not vouchsafed to the rest of the world. Metaphorically speaking, it is a firm resting place—indeed, the only resting place in existence while the rest of the world is under water. The top of Mt. Nitsir is halfway between earth and heaven, where god and man meet. In the simplest terms, Noah has miraculously pierced through the barrier (the flood) ordinarily separating life and death.⁸ He appears unscathed ‘on the

⁵ In Jewish scripture, suddenness can also be an amoral aspect of nature (Job 5:3; Ec 9:12). Some passages speak of the speed of divine retribution, whether against the enemies of the Israelites, against the morally corrupt person, or against the one who opposes Yahweh. The Semitic root characterizing Yahweh's speedy retribution is most often *maher* (מהר)—“quickly.” Cf. Deut 4:26; 7:3–4; 9:3, 12, 16. In one passage Moses warns: “Yahweh will send upon you disaster, panic, and frustration in everything you attempt to do, until you are destroyed and perish *quickly*, on account of the evil of your deeds, because you have forsaken me” (Deut 28:20).

⁶ Lambert and Millard 126 line 8.

⁷ CAD vol. 11.2: 276, Bezold 204. Also cf. D. Nielsen chp. 2 (translated by myself), the section “N-ts-r and the lunar origins of the flood story,” esp. nn. 31 & 32.

⁸ ‘Crossing over’ is a universal religious metaphor for attaining enlightenment, e.g. in Buddhism where it is used frequently. In Paleolithic religion, one crossed the boundary between the mundane and the divine by mystically going through the subterranean cave wall. See Salm 34–39.

other side'⁹ (i.e., 'after' the flood). Secret knowledge allows the Natsarene to be 'awake' when others are 'sleeping,' to act when others do not, and in these ways to overcome death—that is, to attain immortality. In essence, Noah was the first Natsarene.

In the Akkadian version of the flood story the hero is Atrahasis, "Ultra-Wise." His very name betrays the possession of secret knowledge, *gnosis*. Because of his ability to survive the flood, Atrahasis was granted immortality. The Akkadian version is fundamentally a positive, empowering story, in sharp contrast to the biblical Garden of Eden narrative. In the latter, Adam seeks wisdom and to live forever. However, he is unsuccessful and, furthermore, is punished for the attempt—banished from the garden of Eden (Gen 3:22–24), condemned to labor for his bread and to return to the dust of the earth. The optimism of the older religion is here in stark contrast with the fundamental pessimism of Judaism.

The flood story should be interpreted in a gnostic context. Atrahasis/Noah has secret wisdom (*gnosis*) which saves. The rest of mankind lacks that wisdom and dies in sudden disaster.

Gnosis and flowing, 'living' water

Wisdom, particularly secret wisdom, was probably the first religion of man—it was the special dispensation of the Paleolithic shaman who descended deep into the dark underworld (caves) and there passed beyond the psychic vortex to "the other side," and where he met the loving "being of light."¹⁰ The shaman would return to the world above with special wisdom, 'gnosis,' about the relations between man, animals, the divine, and nature.

Wisdom continued to be located in the realm below during the Neolithic Era. But during those six millennia (c. 9,500–3,500 BCE) the life-giving properties of water became prominent with the development of agriculture. The apt equation wisdom = water was made, for wisdom is spiritually life-giving, and water is physically life-giving. This was reinforced by the fact that fresh water, flowing water, appeared to come out of the deep earth through springs and wells.

If wisdom = water, one might consider it curious that, in the flood story, 'wisdom' metaphorically kills mankind. After all, is not wisdom (particularly in a gnostic context) precisely that which saves mankind? The mystery evaporates, however, when we realize that wisdom is a two-edged sword: those who possess it are saved, while those who do not are lost. This insight was known to the ancients and lies at the foundation of the flood story. Mankind perished in the flood because it lacked secret wisdom. The water—that is, 'truth'—saved Atrahasis/Noah but killed the rest of mankind.

In Mesopotamian religion of the Bronze Age, the lord of wisdom, Enki, made his home in the underground ocean (*abzu*). Places where water emerged from the *abzu*—wells and springs—were sacred. Those 'places of gnosis' and 'sources of gnosis' were guarded by divine servants of Enki known as Laḥmu (m.) and Laḥamu (f.). In Bronze Age iconography a Laḥmu stands at each side of a gate, indicating that gnosis is an entryway to the divine. In this sense, wells and springs were gates to the gnostic underworld.

En-ki in Sumerian means "Lord of the Earth." But his Akkadian name is E-a ("House of Water"). The latter name perfectly corresponds with the most prestigious Iron Age

⁹ See below for a discussion of this important phrase.

¹⁰ Salm:22 ff.

temples. In them could be found a large tank of water, called the *abzu*—such as the “brazen sea” in Solomon’s temple (2 Chron 4:2), and the imposing pool of water in the Aššur temple of Sennacherib (r. 704–681 BCE).

J. Roberts has linguistically linked the name *Ea* to the Semitic *hyy* (“to live”), and in this way to the Hebrew god *Yahweh*.¹¹ Roberts further shows that the term is related to the adjective *hayy(um)*, “alive, living,” with the specific meaning of spring-fed or running water.¹² The latter is of considerable importance in the early history of gnosticism, for it linguistically confirms the link between hidden wisdom (represented by *Ea/Enki*) and running, flowing, “living” water. That link—which is, *nota bene*, ancient and ‘gnostic’—manifests in late antiquity as the rite of baptism.

Baptism, water, and Bethlehem

Enki lived in the watery *abzu*, the place of gnosis located in the underworld. He was the divine mediator, friendly advisor, and advocate of mankind, known for intellectual cunning and the ability to find solutions to the most difficult problems confronting man. It was *Enki*, for example, who advised *Ziusudra*¹³ to build the ark and thus escape the flood. As lord of gnosis, *Enki*'s stature is unrivaled in the earliest records.

In both Sumerian and Akkadian religion, the *Laḥmus* were divine helpers of *Enki*. As mentioned above, a pair of *Laḥmus* is often portrayed in Babylonian iconography standing at both sides of a sacred gate, for they guarded and granted access to gnosis. Through that gate gnosis came to man, and through it man also had to metaphorically pass, in a reverse direction, if he wished to reach immortality and transcend his ignorance. Thus man symbolically enters water and becomes baptized—a gnostic metaphor for enlightenment in pre-Christian times. The gate or ‘home’ at which that spiritual transition took place was known as *Beit-Laḥmu*, the “house of *Laḥmu*,” that is, Bethlehem (House “of *Laḥmu*,” not “of Bread,” *lehem*)¹⁴—the birthplace of Jesus the Nazarene.

The Israeli archaeologist Aviram Oshri has shown that the settlement of Bethlehem in Judea (9 km south of Jerusalem) did not exist at the turn of the era when Jesus was allegedly born.¹⁵ In fact, no archaeological evidence of human settlement there exists before late Roman times. There are indeed Chalcolithic and Bronze Age remains below the steep Bethlehem ridge nearby, in a location called *Beit Sahur*, but “when the settlement [of Bethlehem] was first established is not known” (K. Prag). Furthermore,

¹¹ Roberts:19–21 and p. 80, n. 117. Discussion is at Kramer:244. Other parallels between *Enki* and *Yahweh* have been noted, e.g., the confusion of languages in the tower of Babel story (cf. Gen. 11:9). “It is *Enki* who, for reasons that are not made entirely clear, sets up ‘contention’ in the speech of humankind and brings the Golden Age to an end” (Kramer:88).

¹² Confirmation of this is found in the later identification of *Ea* with *nagbu*, “source, spring, groundwater.” See Kramer:145.

¹³ *Ziuzudra* is the Sumerian name of the flood hero. *Atrahasis* and *Utnapishtim* are Akkadian names, and *Noah* the Hebrew name.

¹⁴ “The former explanation that ‘Bethlehem’ means ‘house of bread’ is pure folk-etymology. The name means ‘house of (the goddess) Lahama [sic].” (C. Kopp, *The Holy Places of the Gospels*, Herder, 1963:3.) Some traditionalist scholars continue to reject the *Lahmu/Lahamu* derivation (e.g., B. Chilton, *Rabbi Jesus*, Doubleday, p. 8).

¹⁵ A. Oshri, “Where Was Jesus Born?” *Archaeology*, Nov-Dec. 2005:42–45.

the Old Testament town is entirely unsubstantiated by the material finds. 2 Samuel mentions a gate and a well (see next paragraph). These have not been found. 2 Chronicles 11:5–12 notes that Rehoboam made the “fortress” of Bethlehem “very strong,” but neither wall nor structures dating to biblical times have come to light.¹⁶ In other words, the settlement is—like Nazareth—amply attested in the literary record (in this case, Jewish scripture) but not in the material record.

It seems that “Bethlehem” was a purely mythical place. Indeed, we have seen that it was already the mythical gate to gnosis and the home of the Laḥmu god. An echo of this view can even be found in Jewish scripture. 2 Samuel depicts Bethlehem as the place of a sacred well from which David wished to draw special water. Our explanation above supplies the key to this rather bizarre Old Testament story:

Towards the beginning of harvest three of the thirty chiefs went down to join David at the cave of Adullam, while a band of Philistines was encamped in the valley of Rephaim. David was then in the stronghold; and the garrison of the Philistines was at Bethlehem. David said longingly, “O that someone would give me water to drink from the well of Bethlehem that is by the gate!” Then the three warriors broke through the camp of the Philistines, drew water from the well of Bethlehem that was by the gate, and brought it to David. But he would not drink of it; he poured it out to Yahweh, for he said, “Yahweh forbid that I should do this. Can I drink the blood of the men who went at the risk of their lives?” Therefore he would not drink it. The three warriors did these things. (2 Sam 23:13–17)

David at first yearns for the water of the Bethlehem well—a gnostic yearning. But later he pours that water out on the ground “to Yahweh.” This represents a conversion—illogical in the contrived Jewish setting (for David was already devoted to Yahweh)—but significant to the Hebrew priests and scribes who wished to make the all-important point that Yahweh is superior to the search for gnosis. They concocted an imperfect story which does precisely that. It is one of innumerable passages in Jewish scripture teaching that obedience to Yahweh supersedes man’s inherent gnostic aspirations. That is, in fact, a basic teaching of Judaism.

David, Bethlehem, and the scribes

To this day, archaeologists cannot be certain where the settlement of Bethlehem was located. The scribes who penned the Jewish scriptures were also in doubt, for in several cases they found it necessary to identify Bethlehem with another unlocated settlement called Ephrath/Ephrathah: “So Rachel died, and she was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem), and Jacob set up a pillar at her grave; it is the pillar of Rachel’s tomb, which is there to this day” (Gen 35:19–20; cf. 48:7). However, Jewish scripture clearly locates Rachel’s tomb to the north of Jerusalem (1 Sam 10:2; Jer 31:15). This anomaly has long caused both Jewish and Christian scholars a good deal of consternation.

¹⁶A summary of the material evidence is in K. Prag, “Bethlehem: A Site Assessment,” *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 132 (2000):169ff.

The Jewish scribes who penned the Torah call the person from Ephrath an “Ephratite.” To add to the confusion, however, they at times equate Ephrathite with Ephraimite—that is, with one from the hill country north of Jerusalem.¹⁷

Thus, Bethlehem is sometimes located in Ephraim, north of Jerusalem, and sometimes in Judea, south of the great city. A likely explanation for this contradictory situation is that the southern location of Bethlehem began with Judaism’s need that its great champion and elect of Yahweh, David, come from the region about Jerusalem, namely, from Judean soil.

The Jewish scribes also desired that David come from ‘Beit-Laḥmu,’ for in the preceding ages the gate to Enki’s underworld was whence came gnosis and immortality. After all, when the Jewish scriptures were written, the Yahweh cult with its center in Jerusalem was new and still quite small. No doubt the older pagan religions, including the gnostic water-cults of Mesopotamia and the Levant, were widespread among the people. The scribes appropriated major elements of older religion, including firstly the name of their god *Yahweh* which, as we have seen (p. 17), is linguistically linked to the name *Ea* (Enki), lord of gnosis. D. Nielsen has also shown that *Yahweh* was borrowed by the Israelites from the lunar religion of North Arabia, during the early stage in which they were still gnostic and in Midian.¹⁸ Secondly, we now have evidence that the Jerusalem scribes¹⁹ appropriated the mythological Beit-Laḥmu and transformed it into “Bethlehem of Judea.” The place was imaginary during their time,²⁰ but this did not exercise them, for so much in their accounts regarding David was also imaginary—including perhaps David himself.

The Jerusalem scribes localized David, Bethlehem, Ephrathah, Yahweh, and whatever else they desired to Judea. Note, for example, how the following well-known verse emphasizes the town’s Judean location:

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, *who are one of the little clans of Judah*,
from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.
(Micah 5:2, emphasis added.)

Indeed, the origin was “old, from ancient days,” for the mythical Beit-Laḥmu had long been revered as gateway to gnosis and immortality. Having made “Bethlehem of Judah” the home of David, the scribes proceeded to give the ‘place’ a history. They did so with an engaging story of David’s ancestry—the book of Ruth. There we read of the village’s leading man, Boaz; of how the whole town was excited when Ruth and Naomi arrived (1:19); and of how Ruth, a model of propriety and decency—now the wife of Boaz—became the ancestor of the future King David (4:13, 17). It is a beautiful story, one so edifying that no one might suspect that the town did not even exist when it was penned.

¹⁷ Judg 12:5; 1 Sam 1:1; 1 Kg 11:26.

¹⁸ Nielsen, chp. 4:129, 136.

¹⁹ These scribes are known as the Aaronides and are associated with the “Priestly” source in the documentary hypothesis (see below).

²⁰ Bethlehem of Judea was settled much later (see next section). The only Iron Age Bethlehem to pass the test of archaeology is Bethlehem in Zebulun (Jos 19:15).

Thus the Jerusalem scribes transformed the gate of gnosis into the place of origin of Judaism's greatest king. Their aim was for greater things to happen in Bethlehem, all at the service of Yahweh. Indeed, an important scene in the book of Ruth occurs at the very gate in Bethlehem, which we have seen was of such significance in the older religion:

Then all the people who were at the gate, along with the elders, said, "We are witnesses. May Yahweh make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you produce children in Ephrathah and bestow a name in Bethlehem..."
(Ruth 4:11)

The name which Judaism "bestowed" in Bethlehem was that of King David. Yet, we may ask: If the birthplace of that celebrated king is entirely mythical, then could its favorite son have existed at all?

The cave of Bethlehem

We have seen that the Jerusalem scribes required a Judean home for King David, but one may wonder how his hometown came to be finally localized nine kilometers south of Jerusalem, at the place we now know as Bethlehem. Did something recommend this spot?

In fact, it was not the Jerusalem scribes who localized Bethlehem, but Christians of much later times. Amazingly, the birthplace of Jesus was not determined until the time of Constantine in the early fourth century CE. About 315 CE the Christian monarch authorized construction of a basilica over the very spot Jesus was allegedly born—a cave.²¹

This cave was not in a settlement but in a forest, as we know from reports of the church fathers.²² It was no ordinary cave, however. For a long time it had been a center of the cult of Adonis. Jerome relates (about 395 CE) that the Roman emperor Hadrian constructed a sanctuary to Adonis at the site. If true, Hadrian's activity would have been about 135 CE. Jerome further states that "the lover of Venus [Adonis] has been planted in the cave in which the infant messiah was born."

Jerome concluded that Hadrian did this untoward thing in order to insult Christianity. But is it hardly possible that a Christian shrine existed there before the time of Hadrian. After all, we have seen that there was no Bethlehem, that the cave was in a forest, and we know that the cult of Adonis was already well established, predating Christianity by centuries. One astonishing fact to which the church father witnesses, however, is entirely correct: the cave where Jesus was allegedly born was already a consecrated shrine, but to a different god.

We may ask, then, why the Christians of Constantine's time chose a center of pagan worship as the birthplace of Jesus? The answer to this question requires some investigation into the nature of the god Adonis.

²¹ The birth stories of Matthew and Luke mention no cave. It is in second century extra-canonical works such as the Protevangelium of James (chp. 18) and the writings of Justin Martyr (Dial. With Trypho 78).

²² In 347 CE Cyril of Jerusalem writes that "Bethlehem was enclosed by a forest until the constructions of Constantine." Information for this section is drawn partly from P. Welton, "Bethlehem und die Klage um Adonis." *Zeitschrift des deutschen Palästina-Vereins*, 99 (1983):189–203.

The name Adonis is a graecism of *Adonai*, Hebrew for “My Lord.” Adonis is not so much a unique divinity as the Levantine name for the Sumerian god Dumuzi, known in Hebrew as Tammuz. In Sumerian, Dumu-zi means “Son of Truth” or “True Son.” He was a water god who brought vegetation and prosperity to man, but who was killed and resurrected annually in a cycle that follows the seasons.²³ One of the hallmarks of Dumuzi-Tammuz-Adonis rites was the devotion of women, particularly the mourning for the dead (absent) god in the dry summer months. Women weeping for Tammuz at the gate of Jerusalem are even mentioned by the prophet Ezekiel (8:14–15).

There is presently some confusion in the scholarly literature regarding Dumuzi and an allegedly separate female deity, Dumuzi-Abzu, “True Daughter of the Abzu.” It is my suspicion that these two deities are aspects of one androgynous god—or, rather, of one god who has transcended gender. This element becomes significant in the gnosticism of late antiquity, as we see in passages where male and female no longer exist.²⁴ Transcending gender implies control of the passions—another theme much in evidence in gnostic Christian sources.²⁵

Even though Dumuzi was popularly known as the husband of Inanna, and Adonis as a youthful and beautiful male, the androgynous nature of the god was indeed part of Syrian religion:

In Syria where Adonis reigned, the cave of Bethlehem was the center of mysteries and celebrations of the androgynous god. Women came and mourned his/her mystical death. This place was consecrated to Astarte and Tammuz, in the sacred forest which surrounded it...

The cave of Adonis became the cave of Jesus. One divinity succeeded the other without popular belief being seriously troubled, or even being able to distinguish the elements which separated the one from the other. The same crowds which came to celebrate Adonis at the cave in Bethlehem now came to celebrate Jesus with equal enthusiasm, equal faith, knowing only that the symbol for the eternal sun was now being rejuvenated under a new name.²⁶

Since Paleolithic times man has descended into caves to contact the transcendent, as we witness in the famous cave paintings of Lascaux and other places in southern Europe.²⁷ In the Bronze Age, Enki/Ea was master of the abzu, the underworld ocean representing gnosis. Wells and springs were openings of that abzu to the world above. Similarly, caves were sacred openings to the underworld, as we see in the mystery

²³ In some accounts Dumuzi/Tammuz descends into the underworld for six months of the year and is ‘brought back to life’ by Inanna.

²⁴ See, e.g., Gospel of Thomas 22; Mt 5:27–28; 19:11–12; Lk 23:29; Rev 14:3–5, etc.

²⁵ See ‘encratite’ works including the Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of Philip, Book of Thomas the Contender, Exegesis of the Soul, Dialog of the Savior, Authoritative Teaching, and Testimony of Truth—all found at Nag Hammadi.

²⁶ H. Vincent and F. Abel, *Bethléem: Le Sanctuaire de la Nativité*. Paris: V. Lecoffre, 1914:12–13. Translation by RS.

²⁷ Salm, “Pre-rational Religion,” and the writings of D. Lewis-Williams.

religions of late antiquity.²⁸ It was there that hidden, secret wisdom was to be found, mediated by Sybils, chthonic deities, and the quintessential gnostic messenger from the underworld, the snake—an animal which lacks eyelids (is ever vigilant), which sloughs its skin (does not die), and which is perfectly formed to descend and ascend through crevasses in the ground.

In short, the Christian Church located the birthplace of the Son of God over a cave dedicated to Adonis, a cave which had metaphorically led to gnosis. No doubt this was for strategic reasons. After all, what better way exists to defeat paganism than to turn its holiest shrines into Christian ones?

The Church similarly celebrates the birth of Jesus on December 25, the birthday of Sol Invictus, the Unconquered Sun with which Mithra was identified. Since the Stone Age that day had marked a great annual celebration, the time when the sun's light visibly returns to man after the long summer/fall declination—the 'resurrection' of god.²⁹

In such ways, religions do not start from scratch, as it were, but import useful elements from older religions. Judaism had done something similar with "Bethlehem." This had been a mythical place representing the gate to gnosis, Beit-Laḥmu. Still mythical, it became the literary hometown of David. Thus, Jews and Christians transformed what had been precious to pagans into what is precious to them.

Ephrathah and 'crossing over'

In Jewish scripture, Bethlehem is sometimes equated with Ephrath/Ephrathah (Gen 35:19; 48:7; Ruth 4:11; Mic 5:2). Elsewhere, the latter is the "father" of Bethlehem (1 Chr 4:4). Both 'places' were not material settlements in Judah, Benjamin, or Ephraim, but mythical locales in pre-Israelite religion. Beit-Laḥmu was the home of the Laḥmu divinities, servants of the great god of hidden wisdom who guarded the 'gate' of his house. Hidden wisdom (gnosis) had long been symbolized by fresh water emerging from within and under the earth. Thus, it is no surprise that the Bethlehem known to Jewish scribes was noted for a well with special water, as cited in the biblical passage above.

The etymology of *Ephrath* (אפרת) is of some significance. Its root a/e-p-r (אפר) corresponds to the Babylonian-Assyrian *ebēru* (אבר) with the common exchange of labials *beth* and *pe*. *Ebēru* means "reach the other side, go across, through, or over."³⁰ This meaning conforms well to the 'gate to gnosis' that we have been discussing. The Hebrew root for "pass over, through, or pass on" is closely related: עבר ('*br*, with exchange of the gutturals *ayin* and *aleph*, also common).³¹ The Mesopotamian e-b-r and Hebrew '-b-r correspond in meaning and have yielded e-p-r (→Ephrath).

²⁸ See J. Ustinova, *Caves and the Ancient Greek Mind: Descending Underground in the Search for Ultimate Truth*. Oxford: University Press, 2009.

²⁹ This is four days after the theoretical winter solstice on Dec. 21. For four days before and four after the solstice, the sun's weak force appears unchanged.

³⁰ C. Bezold, *Babylonisch-Assyrisches Glossar*. Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1926, p 13; CAD vol. 20:10 ff., "ebēru"; cf. Drower and Macuch, *A Mandaic Dictionary* (Oxford, 1963) p. 4, "ABR I, "to get over, pass over, get through."

³¹ BDB 716 ff.

The nominal form of Hebrew *ayin-beth-resh* signifies ‘the other side,’³² the place one reaches when one has ‘crossed over.’ In a gnostic context this is the place of enlightenment, rest, and immortality. Here, then, must be the root meaning of the place *Ephrath*. It is the land of salvation on ‘the other side,’ to which *Beit-Lahmu* (Bethlehem) is the all-important gate of entry.

A gnostic and metaphorical interpretation of the imaginary *Bethlehem* and *Ephrath/Ephrathah* helps us make sense of the words “on the way to Ephrath” (and similar locutions) often employed by the Jewish scribe in conjunction with *Bethlehem*. The phrase occurs four times in the book of Genesis, always in association with the death and burial of Rachel:

[Jacob speaks.] “For when I came from Paddan, Rachel, alas, died in the land of Canaan *on the way*, while there was *still some distance to go to Ephrath*; and I buried her there *on the way to Ephrath*.”

(Gen 48:7, NRSV. Cf. 35:16, 19. Emphasis added.)

All this insistence on the proximity of Bethlehem and Ephrath reveals an unsuspected poignancy when read from a symbolic and gnostic perspective. Rachel died while “still some distance to go to Ephrath.” Interpreted spiritually, this means she had not quite reached ‘the land of salvation’—a condition generally applicable to humans, whose lives indeed usually end with some measure of disappointment.

The blessing of the Bethlehemites upon Boaz, in the book of Ruth, now also receives an added dimension: “May you produce children in Ephrathah” they all wish in unison (Ruth 4:11). No greater blessing, indeed, could be wished upon a future parent.

We have seen that the Hebrew root ‘-b-r (here vocalized for convenience as *eber*) is linguistically related to *Ephrath* and means “pass over, through, or pass on.” *Eber* denotes the movement of people from one place to another, but particularly over or through water.³³ One immediately thinks of the Hebrew exodus from Egypt, and of their passage across the Jordan. Amazingly, the name “Hebrew” (עברי) itself derives from this very root.³⁴ This is further attestation that, in the earliest stage of its formation—a stage which took place in the gnostic-imbued region of Midian³⁵—the Hebrews referred to themselves as those who ‘crossed over.’

This interpretation is supported by the fact that recent scholarship has failed to find any historical evidence of the Israelite exodus out of Egypt.³⁶ Though figurative, that exodus is across water, and we have now identified two powerful gnostic symbols at the basis of the exodus story—‘water’ (= gnosis) and ‘crossing over’ (= attaining the land of salvation, *Ephrath*). The Hebrews were followers of Moses, and he (whether historical or not) may have been an ‘awake and watchful’ leader who had crossed over from ignorance to enlightenment—a Natsarene like the mythical Noah.

³² BDB 719, no. 5676.

³³ BDB 717.

³⁴ BDB 720, no. 5680.

³⁵ Nielsen chp. 4.

³⁶ N. Lemche, *Prelude to Israel's Past*. Peabody: Hendrickson 1998:54–55.

After the Exodus, crossing the Jordan River becomes symbolic of attaining ‘the promised land.’ The Jordan is crossed literally in Jewish scriptures, sometimes literally and figuratively in the Pseudepigrapha, and metaphorically in Mandaean scriptures. Joshua (= “Jesus”), Moses’ lieutenant, crosses the river with the Israelites while “the priests who bore the ark of the covenant of Yahweh stood on dry ground in the middle of the Jordan” (Jos 3:17). No clearer image is possible of Yahweh metaphorically dominating what was thoroughly gnostic territory: the middle of the river of gnosis.

The Natsarene is metaphorically the one who crosses the Flood, the Sea of Reeds, or the Jordan River with impunity. When we consider that water was a symbol of gnosis already in Neolithic times,³⁷ then ‘passing across (or through) the waters’ becomes a metaphor for attaining enlightenment. Dipping into water is dipping into wisdom. This concept eventually led to the rite of baptism.

Crossing a body of water is a very ancient metaphor for the human being who seeks to understand his/her material limitations and to transcend them. In the Hebrew stories we can still detect the gnostic skeleton: water (wisdom), under lunar influence, crushes those who have not befriended it—those who do not have secret knowledge. They attempt to cross over but are unable. However, the Natsarene—like Noah, Moses, and Joshua—understands the secret ways of the divine and crosses the barrier unscathed.

The demise of gnosticism

Scant elements of the gnostic worldview remain in the Jewish scriptures. They are hidden, to be ferreted out from among the obloquy heaped upon gnosticism by the later scribes. The meaning of old gnostic symbols was lost, perhaps unknown even to many in later antiquity. When the Jewish religion turned against its gnostic roots, the Aaronides of Jerusalem invented an impassable chasm between man and god, one *not* to be crossed. Thus Judaism made an about-face, from a people who at first celebrated ‘crossing over’ from the material to the transcendent, to a people who strictly forbade even the presumption of this possibility.

In Jewish scripture, Yahweh is repeatedly victorious over those who try to see, reach, or be like “god” (cf. The Tower of Babel; Adam seeking the fruit of knowledge, etc). Yahweh is also victorious over the land-serpent (a symbol of wisdom as early as paleolithic times) called Behemoth, and especially over the water-serpent—the ‘monster’ Leviathan. It has been suggested that the name *Leviathan* is related to *Levi*. This would reflect the ill fortune that befell the Levites with the ascendancy of the Aaronides in post-exilic times (see below). In brief, even though the earliest Hebrew self-definition was gnostic, the religion soon and determinedly betrayed those roots. It exchanged *understanding* ‘that which is’ for *obedience to* ‘That Which Is’ (*Yahweh*). Worship of god replaced understanding of life. I suggest that this inevitably occurs when a religion reaches a certain level of organization, at which stage a powerful priesthood finds obedience necessary and independent searching threatening.

Jewish scripture repudiates in no uncertain terms gnostic elements such as ‘becoming like god’ (“all-knowing,” “enlightened”). In this connection, it is instructive to compare the various flood stories. In the older version, Ea/Enki confers divinity upon Utnapishtim, the Mesopotamian Noah, with the following words: “Formerly Utnapishtim was a human being, but now he and his wife have become gods like us. Let

³⁷ Water from the ground gave life to men, animals, and plants. The source of the underground waters (the subterranean *abzu*) was the home of the divine, the place of unchanging wisdom, the location of the afterlife, and the resting place of moon and sun.

Utnapishtim reside far away, at the mouth of the rivers” (Gilg. XI:192 f).³⁸ None of this is found in the Jewish version, where Yahweh merely blesses Noah, whose progeny then populate the earth (Gen 9:1).

The second chapter of Genesis also manifests the strident Jewish rejection of gnosticism. “The tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat,” Yahweh thunders to Adam. “For in the day that you eat of it you shall die” (Gen 2:16–17). Adam, however, eats of the fruit and does not die but in fact gains precious knowledge. He does not succumb to intimidation but essentially gives the lie to Yahweh. “See,” Yahweh then remonstrates, “the man has become like one of us,³⁹ knowing good and evil; and now he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever” (Gen 3:22). This is jealousy of man’s potential, pure and simple. It shows Yahweh essentially as man’s opponent, henceforth doing what he can to limit man’s possibilities and to prevent his ‘reaching out to eat from the tree of life.’ Via the pens of Jewish scribes, Yahweh ejects man from the Garden of Eden and posts cherubim to guard “the tree of life” (3:24). Now there is a chasm between man and god, and the basic message of Yahweh is “Do not approach!” This is diametrically contrary to the gnostic message. In addition, Yahweh lays a number of frightful punishments upon man for his insufferable disobedience (3:16–19). In sum, these verses establish the basic foundation of the Jewish faith, and reveal it to be a religion of intimidation and limited possibilities.

Bethlehem, Dan, Levites, and Aaronides

A curious story in Judges 17–18 links Bethlehem and Dan, the settlement far to the north at the source of the Jordan River. The story is constructed in such a way that its intention is inescapable: Bethlehem of Judah was the origin of the ‘wayward’ priesthood of Dan.

Dan (known as Laish in pre-Israelite times) was a fabled religious center with its own priesthood. This sanctuary lay at the headwaters of the river Jordan and at the foot of Mt. Hermon. The area had for many centuries (even millennia) been known far and wide as an international cultic center, to the extent that even the ancient Gilgamesh journeyed from Mesopotamia to the “cedar mountain” of Lebanon in search of wisdom. There, he found Utnapishtim, the hero of the flood story, now living his immortal existence far from ordinary man.

In Jewish scripture we encounter much polemic against the northern sanctuary. Anti-Danite material is found in all three branches of the Tanakh: the Torah, Prophets, and Writings. The story in Judges 17–18 is but one example. It contrives to explain how Dan, dedicated to idol worship, came to be a part of Israel and, furthermore, why it was perpetually under a curse. The story imputes the origins of Danite religion to a Levite from Bethlehem. Without entering into an extended discussion here, we note that this is also an example of hostility directed by the Aaronide priests of Jerusalem (who redacted the Torah) against the “Levites,” the landless clan of Israelite priests scattered throughout Palestine.

The story under consideration is briefly as follows. Micah, a man “from the hill country of Ephraim” keeps an idol in his house. If this weren’t reprehensible enough in

³⁸ Ziusudra attains “Dilmun,” the land of the blessed (Lambert and Millard 145). Atrahasis “lived in the temple of Ea, my lord” (Atr. 22.421,7).

³⁹ The plural “us” shows that Yahweh was still but one among many divinities.

priestly Jewish eyes, we learn that the silver out of which the idol was made had been stolen by Micah from his own mother and, additionally, that the silver was under a curse (17:1–4).

“To live wherever he could find a place,” a Levite “of Bethlehem in Judah” arrives at Micah's house in the “hill country of Ephraim.” Micah offers to hire him to be his priest. The salary is “ten pieces of silver a year,” and we can readily infer that this payment is from the silver which had been cursed.

Judges 18 introduces the Danites who are still wandering in the south and looking for a permanent home. The parallel with the Levite of Bethlehem who is also looking for a home cannot be coincidental. At 18:3 the Danites arrive at Micah's house, and “they recognized the voice of the young Levite.” In other words, there was a relationship between the Danites and the Levite when the latter was still in his hometown of Bethlehem. This further links the Danites with this particular Levite, and both with Bethlehem of Judah.

At 18:6 the Levite, now acting as priest of Micah, is a mouthpiece of Yahweh. He encourages the Danites in their mission to find a home and it is immediately thereafter that the Danites descend upon Laish/Dan. In this way, the author has shaped his story so that the Levite from Bethlehem plays a critical role in the establishment of the northern settlement of Dan by the Israelites.

The priestly author now carefully describes how the accursed silver was made into the idol venerated at Dan (18:30–31). In other words, in the mind of the author, Dan lay under a curse from its inception. Furthermore, the priests who ministered at Dan were likewise under a curse. They are explicitly named: “Jonathan son of Gershom, son of Moses, and his sons.” It can be no coincidence that the Gershonites inhabited the extreme northern part of Israel and also portions of the Bashan east of the Jordan. This includes the area around Dan, and is familiar to us as “Galilee.”⁴⁰

The entire story in Judges 18–19 can be seen as a self-legitimation exercise written by the Aaronides in Jerusalem against the age-old priesthood resident at the sanctuary of Dan. Our interest focuses particularly on an aspect of the Micah story that has received scant scholarly attention: the connection between Bethlehem, the “hill country of Ephraim,” and Dan. These three geographical entities are linked in their adversarial position vis-a-vis the Aaronides: (1) Dan is the location of the delegitimized northern cult; (2) Ephraim is territory encompassed by Samaria—a region long delegitimized in the eyes of Jerusalem; and (3) Bethlehem, according to the story under discussion, is the hometown of the Levite who inspired the idolatrous cult that eventually located at Dan, and which did so via Samaria.

There is not space here to explore the importance of Dan/Galilee as a famous gnostic cult center already in the third millennium BCE. Issuing from the mountain above Dan, the Jordan was especially sacred, its water a pre-eminent symbol of gnosis. The Jordan was the gnostic river *par excellence*. Dipping into it (“baptism”) was symbolically the equivalent of enlightenment.

The great mountain was itself the original Zion (Tsion), known also as Hermon and Senir. In the Bronze and Iron Ages, “the entrance to the cave of night” was thought to be located there, for over that mountain the sun descended into the western sea for its nightly journey under the earth. Here, in other words, were the gates to the underworld.

⁴⁰ Galilee extended east of the Jordan, as we see from the description of Josephus (Wars 3.3.1).

This was where the Laḥmu deities had their home. Here, metaphorically speaking, was the first “Bethlehem.”

In the Micah story, a Levite provides the connection between Bethlehem and Dan. This suggests that Levites were somehow implicated in gnosticism. This should come as no surprise, for Nielsen has shown that Moses, a Levite (Ex 2:1–2), was a devotee of the gnostic moon religion indigenous to North Arabia, which he learned from the *Kāhin* Jethro in Midian.⁴¹

If the Levites were indeed linked in some way to gnosticism, this would in great measure clarify the hostility directed at them in the Torah, and why the Levites are demeaned and subordinated to the Aaronides in no uncertain terms. Commenting on Num 18:2–7, E. Rivkin writes: “The Levites are to function as Aaron’s servants and under penalty of death are prohibited from burning sacrifices at the altar.”⁴² By Aaronides is meant the aloof and ritualistic post-exilic priesthood centered in the Jerusalem Temple.

The so-called Priestly author is the mouthpiece of the Aaronides. Much of Exodus (25–31; 35–40), all of Leviticus, and Numbers are attributed to his hand. The Priestly author is responsible for elevating the Aaronides over the Levites. In these texts Moses pales before Aaron, while the latter and the Aaronides are the principal concern of Yahweh, whose overwhelming focus and love is on Aaron, his sons, the cult, and the tabernacle. Rivkin writes: “We must, therefore, conclude that the Aaronides come to power with the finalized Pentateuch and, as such, are their own creation” (IDB).

The priestly Aaronides, centered in Jerusalem, are the post-exilic religious hegemonists who took authority away from the pre- and concurrently-existing Levites. By “their own creation,” Rivkin means that the Aaronides invented their own pedigree, invented their status as Levites (for Aaron was supposedly himself a Levite), and in this way they took over from the ancient and ‘true’ Levites the administration of the Temple and essentially of Judaism.

The account noted above in which a Levite from Bethlehem goes northwards to Dan with accursed silver is an Aaronide story, at once pejorative of Bethlehem, of the Levites, and of Dan. The Aaronides could not exclude the non-Jerusalem based Levites from the cult—for Levi was one of the twelve sons of Jacob, and his descendants had long been in the land carrying out priestly functions. But they could, and did, exclude those Levites from approaching “to offer incense before Yahweh” (Num 16:40).

It would appear, from our inferences, that the non-Jerusalem Levites were indeed Hebrews, but gnostic-leaning Hebrews. We can also speculate that gnosticism became ‘heretical’ with the ascendancy of the highly centralized Aaronidism of Jerusalem in the post-Exilic period (c. 450-400 BCE). It is at this point in the organization of the religion that Judaism betrayed its gnostic roots, as mentioned above. Henceforth, the non-Jerusalem Levites constituted a surviving vestige of the original Hebrew religion, of the religion of Moses, of North Arabia—and of Dan. It is those Levites who carried on the torch of gnosticism in more or less heterodox and ‘hidden’ traditions, represented by a number of works in the Jewish pseudepigrapha (above all, the Enoch literature). That literature represents a force which powerfully influenced early Christianity, including its anti-Jerusalem and anti-cultic aspects (cf. Mk 11:15–19; 7:6, 15, etc).

⁴¹ Nielsen Chp. 2:139–142.

⁴² IDB, Suppl. volume, “Aaron, Aaronides.”

According to this scenario, the decentralized and landless Levites represented a heterodox Judaism vilified at every turn by the ‘normative’ Jerusalem-bound Aaronides. The Korah episode illustrates Aaronide animosity. Korah, of Levitical descent and supported by other Levites, dared to challenge his subordination to the Aaronides and demanded full priestly status. The Priestly writer fashioned his story (Num 16) in such a way that a divine sign would determine who would be allowed to approach Yahweh—i.e., control the Temple and take pre-eminence in representing Israel.

The divine sign was not long in coming. The ground opened up and swallowed Korah and his levitical allies, together with their wives and children, “and all these went down alive to Sheol; the earth closed over them, and they perished from the midst of the assembly” (vv. 32–33). The purpose of the story is then stated: “a reminder to the Israelites that no outsider, who is not of the descendants of Aaron, shall approach to offer incense before Yahweh” (v. 40). It was no longer sufficient to be merely a Levite—one had to be a descendent of Aaron. Thus, insiders and outsiders exchanged places. The latecomers and true outsiders, the Aaronides (whose Levitical pedigree was possibly fabricated), now defined themselves as insiders; while the rest of the long-standing Levites who had worked among the people for centuries—the true insiders—now became outsiders. Henceforth, the Jerusalem Aaronides wielded unchallenged authority within the priestly clan of Levi and over the Temple (Num 17:1–13). Until the rise of the Pharisees, they were pre-eminent in Israelite religion.

Watchfulness, gnosis, and Christian scripture

A review of the meaning of the root n-ts-r shows that the Natsarene’s ability to attain wisdom and ‘cross over,’ as discussed above, depends on an inner propensity to somehow be watchful and alert. We have discussed how, in Jewish scripture, Yahweh punishes the one who is not prepared, so that an act of nature or of god/Yahweh appears as a sudden catastrophe (pp. 14–15 above).

The New Testament also contains sayings and parables which emphasize precisely this. The divine will appear suddenly, at the most unlikely and inconvenient times (midnight, when you least expect it, etc.). God chooses to appear when men are in deep spiritual sleep, and he rewards those that are ‘awake’ at such times (Mt 25:1 ff). Being found metaphorically awake or asleep is the judgment.

The Gospel of Mark is especially fulsome in enjoining ‘watchfulness’ at several points in Jesus’ ministry. Among pertinent passages, the best known is perhaps the scene in the Garden of Gethsemane (14:32 ff). Jesus enjoins the disciples to “remain here, and watch” (γρηγορεῖτε) while he prays. The disciples are unable to do so and fall “asleep.”

The First Evangelist also writes: “Watch therefore—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or in the morning—lest he come *suddenly* [ἐξαίφνης] and find you asleep” (Mk 13:35–36).

The Matthean evangelist illustrates the suddenness of the Lord precisely through the story of the Flood:

“As were the days of Noah, so will be the coming of the Son of man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and they did not know until the flood came and swept them all away, so will be the coming of the Son of man. . . Watch therefore, for you do not know on

what day your Lord is coming. . . For the Son of man is coming *at an hour you do not expect.*" (Mt 24:37 f., emphasis added.)

The association of the Flood with divine retribution can be no coincidence. It shows that to ancient Sumerians and early Christians alike, sudden and devastating divine retribution was the lot of those who failed to be watchful.

The Third Evangelist portrays the sudden coming of the Son of man as the eschatological judgment:

"But take heed to yourselves lest your hearts be weighted down with dissipation and drunkenness and cares of this life, and that day come upon you *suddenly* like a snare; for it will come upon all who dwell upon the face of the whole earth. But watch at all times, praying that you may have strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of man." (Lk 21:34–36, emphasis added.)

At the beginning of this article we briefly discussed how one is to remove the element of 'surprise,' the 'suddenness' of the appearance of the divine (the Son of man). To repeat, the key is knowledge into the ways of the divine. The wise person knows, and thus the action of the divine does not catch him off guard. Being watchful he avoids ruin. Being watchful, he also has insight unseen by his peers—*gnosis*. The New Testament relates that one is to metaphorically prepare for the divine gaze *precisely where and when one least expects*, as did the wise maidens at midnight (Mt 25:1 ff). Watchfulness bequeaths knowledge and understanding of that which is hidden. In this way, one corrects the least visible deficiencies—those that are inner (Mk 7:21). In sum, one is perfect (Mt 5:48).

It is impossible to overemphasize the importance of watchfulness, *natsar*, in gnosticism. In late antiquity, the mantle of gnosticism passed to the Natsraia (Mandeans) and to the Natsarenes (pre-Christians). Their names betray the Semitic root that, already for millennia, had been associated with a preparedness and hidden knowledge that *saves*. For gnostics, water was a sacred symbol of gnosis. They were known in antiquity as belonging to baptist sects, and they frequently immersed in water to memorialize and re-enact their central sacrament, the fabled attainment of gnosis ('enlightenment').

The Mandeans venerate John "the Baptizer," a gnostic figure who dipped others in water—that is, he metaphorically introduced them into the way of gnosis. John's teaching came from gnosis (water), out of *Bethlehem* (the gate to gnosis), from *Ephrathah* (the land of salvation)—even as his ancient namesake, Oannes, the half-fish half-man of Mesopotamian legend, emerged from the sea to teach the Sumerians wisdom more than two millennia earlier.⁴³ John preached a hopeful and revolutionary message—that salvation (*Yeshua*, "Jesus") is now and always at hand, readily available to each and every person through watchfulness and the seeking of inner gnosis. This is the hidden knowledge, the *nitsirtu* known already in Mesopotamian religion two millennia earlier.

The gnostic prophet, John the Baptizer, was the quintessential Natsarene.

⁴³ Cf. The *Babyloniaca* of Berossus, the Mesopotamian priest of the third century BCE.

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