

The Frazer Lecture
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THE PROBLEM OF
SIMILARITY IN ANCIENT
NEAR EASTERN
RELIGIONS

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'To sift out the elements of culture which a race has independently evolved and to distinguish them accurately from those which it has derived from other races is a task of extreme difficulty and delicacy, which promises to occupy students of man for a long time to come.' (*The Golden Bough*, x, p. vii.)

THE study of ancient Near Eastern religions is still somewhat disorganized by the huge legacy left to it by Frazer. Some orientalist refuse even to accept it. Hermann Kees writes in the Preface of his *Totenglauben und Jenseitsvorstellungen der alten Aegypter*:

'It seemed to me a mistaken principle to utilize views and customs of other peoples for the explanation of Egyptian views on the Hereafter as long as the rich funerary literature of the Egyptians has not been fully exhausted.'¹

But his scrupulous Egyptological orthodoxy would be more impressive if his book did not contain remarks such as

'The connexion [of the thought of death] with the sun and the sunset . . . is too exalted for the natural thought of simple people.'

which make one wish that the author had read one volume at least of *The Golden Bough*.

Most orientalist have learned from Frazer that studying a religion in isolation reduces one's chances of understanding it. Where we differ is in our attitude towards the legacy; should we retain the inherited securities? The point at issue is Frazer's comparative method and the validity of the concepts which he coined and used. They have become so familiar that terms like 'dying god', 'divine king', and the like are used nowadays as if they designated well-defined but ubiquitous phenomena—much as we recognize rats and mice all over the world and leave it to zoologists to discuss the finer points of colour and size.

¹ Hermann Kees, *Totenglauben und Jenseitsvorstellungen der alten Aegypter*, Leipzig, 1926, p. 31.

This procedure has led to regrettable results, as I shall show in a moment. I want first to make it clear that there is little justification for it in Frazer's work. True, Frazer did not define his general concepts with any precision; but then he did not attach great value to the theoretical side of his studies. In the Preface to the last part of *The Golden Bough* he wrote:

'My contribution to the history of the human mind consists of little more than a rough and purely provisional classification of facts.'¹

The fluidity of Frazer's categories appears as soon as one glances through the List of Contents of his great work. In the first part, called 'The Magic Art and the Evolution of Kings', all the main themes of *The Golden Bough* are introduced. The next, called 'Taboo and the Perils of the Soul', starts with a chapter on the Burden of Royalty. Part III is called 'The Dying God', but deals with divine kings dying a violent death. Part IV is called 'Adonis, Attis, Osiris' and deals, therefore, with the dying gods of the ancient Near East, which are not 'dying gods' in the strict Frazerian sense since they are not (as we know now) incarnate in men who were ultimately killed. Part V, 'Spirits of the Corn and of the Wild', deals, according to its Preface, with 'the same theme in other regions and among other races'.

We need not continue this analysis. For Frazer it was axiomatic that all these phenomena represented not only 'the same theme' but a distinct phase in the evolution of human thought.

Frazer did not think of his basic assumption as an axiom, perhaps because his conviction of its truth had grown with his work. He wrote in the Preface of the last part:

'If there is one general conclusion which seems to emerge from the mass of particulars, I venture to think that it is the essential similarity in the working of the less developed human mind among all races, which corresponds to the essential similarity in their bodily frame revealed by comparative anthropology.'²

But this paragraph contains more than is at once apparent. In so far as Frazer refers to that curious compound of thought, feeling, and intuition that creates myth and magic, we must

¹ *Balder the Beautiful*, i, p. vi.

² *Ibid.*, p. vii.

accept his 'essential similarity'. But Frazer referred not only to the processes of mythopoeic thought but to its concrete manifestations in beliefs and institutions; 'divine kingship', the 'scapegoat', and so on, represented 'the same theme' whenever phenomena occurred that could be classed under such headings. It is this problem, the problem of essential similarity in concrete manifestations of beliefs and customs, which I intend to consider here. I shall therefore leave aside two kinds of similarities: those due to a prehistoric diffusion of culture—at best a hypothesis—and those due to conquest, trade, or other contacts. Such similarities are contingent, and Frazer intended something universal and primordial when he spoke of 'the essential similarity . . . among all races . . . which corresponds to the essential similarity of their bodily frame'. He suggests, with characteristic reserve, something resembling a natural law, something like a phylogenesis of culture in which all early stages were necessarily alike while the later ones retained traces of a common past—like the evolutionary embryologist discovering reptilian and fish-like stages in the development of the human being. It is true that Frazer's interest was not primarily focused on this aspect of his work, for he was the least theoretical and least dogmatic of scholars. But he lived in an evolutionist age and shared its premisses. It seems to me that he was pleased to find that the 'history of the human mind' could be seen as a clear and simple evolution; it gave meaning to the immense labour he had undertaken and lent it a dignity beyond the 'provisional classification of facts' to which he purported to resign himself. We must not forget that the response of his contemporaries could only strengthen his belief in a theory so humbly—almost casually—stated. It was Frazer's generation which claimed to discover 'the dying god' behind the figure of Christ, a totemic feast behind the Last Supper, a corn demon behind Oedipus, and another natural power, a mother goddess in a primitive sense, behind the Mater Dolorosa, and even behind Clytemnestra and Penelope.

It is Frazer's vision of 'essential similarity' and of continuity in change which lends a particular grandeur to his work, and a peculiar note of tragedy to the fact that, in the end, he felt grave

doubts as to its significance. In the Preface to the last edition of Part IV—‘Adonis, Attis, Osiris’—he wrote:

‘The longer I occupy myself with questions of ancient mythology the more diffident I become of success in dealing with them. . . . If we are taxed with wasting life in seeking to know what can never be known, and what, if it could be discovered, would not be worth knowing, what can we plead in our defence? I fear, very little’

These are grim reflections. Do they express a disappointment because the root of cultural phylogenesis, the source of its dynamics, stood now revealed as the simplest of human preoccupations—the preoccupation with the material well-being of man and society? Did Frazer realize that the vast spectacle of *The Golden Bough*—its poetry, its cruelty, its inexhaustible variety—could not in any sense of the word be ‘explained’ in such a manner? In trying to abstract the meaning of rites and myths something essential was lost and their reputed origin seemed inadequate and even trivial.

If the *facts* had seemed to suggest such a conclusion to Frazer it was because they had been distorted by an evolutionistic bias. If one thinks, as Frazer thought, that certain

‘motives have operated widely, perhaps universally, in human society, producing in varied circumstances a variety of institutions specifically different but generically alike’,¹

a twofold source of error is introduced. Differences are, as merely specific, subordinated to similarities. The similarities, on the other hand, are given undue weight, as reflections of an original unity. Yet they may be merely superficial or may altogether disappear if studied in the context. In short, the belief that differences are specific and similarities generic vitiates one’s very approach to the evidence.

I fear that many followers of Frazer have succumbed to this danger. They share Frazer’s viewpoint, but neither his misgivings nor his caution. In their work—and it is very influential—Frazer’s tentative suggestion of ‘essential similarities’ is hardened—I might say petrified—to the claim that one definite

¹ *The Magic Art*, i, p. 10. It should be noted that the paragraph is formulated in a more tentative way than our quotation suggests.

pattern underlies most or all¹ religions, or at least those with which we are here concerned—the religions of the ancient Near East.²

Before I investigate this claim in detail I want to make the minor objection that the use of 'pattern' in this sense brings discredit to a term which has proved valuable in another context, namely, in the morphology of culture. Thus Professor Evans-Pritchard declared, in his recent Marett Lecture,³ that the social anthropologist 'tries to discover the structural patterns of a society'. And Ruth Benedict gave the title *Patterns of Culture* to a book in which she outlined the distinctive characteristics of three primitive cultures. She demonstrated that peculiarities of belief and custom were not contingencies, but that they were determined by, and derived meaning from, certain fundamental values, certain overwhelming preoccupations prevalent in particular cultures. These distinctive and determinant values of each culture Ruth Benedict called its 'pattern'. The word was well chosen since it denotes order and coherence; and she did, in fact, show that once the 'pattern' of a given culture is recognized, its manifestations—however odd from another culture's viewpoint—form a coherent and comprehensive whole.

But if 'pattern' is not used in this sense, if the term is not a tool in a search for the systems of value which *distinguish* one Near Eastern Civilization from another, a system which, in each case, reveals the coherence of the political, religious, ethical, and artistic norms, then it becomes a rigid scheme. Then 'pattern' means a fixed combination of certain elements which are

¹ A. M. Hocart, *Kingship*, Oxford, 1927.

² How closely the 'pattern school' follows Frazer may be shown by two quotations. Professor S. H. Hooke writes in *The Labyrinth*, London, 1935, p. 214, about an early stage '... when the focus of the attempt to secure the well-being of the community was a single individual possessing qualities of strength, or knowledge, or both, which indicated him as the centre of the ritual life of the community. He was both king and god, the term god implying nothing more at that stage than the king in his ritual aspect with all the magical potencies which he embodied.' And Professor E. O. James writes in *Christian Myth and Ritual*, London, 1933, p. 40: 'Thus at the beginning of the Christian era the stage was set for a new act in the great ancient drama of the divine kingship and its ritual pattern.'

³ *Man*, 1950, No. 198.

expected to occur and which are, consequently, postulated even when they have left no trace in our evidence.

It seems to me that this procedure has been followed with particular recklessness in writings on the Old Testament when, for instance, the imagery of certain psalms is taken, not as the poetic expression of religious feeling, but as a distinct reference to rites which are not known to have taken place at Jerusalem, but are postulated because they are indispensable parts of the hypothetical common 'pattern'.¹ Or, to give another example: we know that Jewish soldiers of the garrison of Darius II in Upper Egypt owned a temple at Elephantine where they worshipped the goddesses Anath and Ashima beside Jahweh; it does not seem to me to follow that 'this bare fact is sufficient to suggest that the normal pattern was broadly followed',² in other words that, half a millennium earlier, in the Solomonic temple at Jerusalem, Jahweh annually consummated a sacred marriage with Anath at the New Year Festival.³ Used in this manner the concept 'pattern' is applied as a transfer-pattern imposed upon our evidence on the slightest pretext because its validity for the whole of the Near East is taken for granted.

To show that the problem of similarity in ancient Near Eastern religions is not solved by this postulate of a common pattern I must enter into a little more detail. In a volume entitled *Myth*

¹ I do not presume, of course, to reject out of hand the view that certain ritual acts are reflected in the Psalms. It is, for instance, shown convincingly by Hans Schmidt, *Die Thronfahrt Jahwes am Fest der Jahreswende*, Tübingen, 1927, that Jahweh was re-enthroned after a great procession. But here the evidence is handled with the greatest delicacy and all exaggerations are avoided; festive processions are, of course, ubiquitous, and not clements of any fixed pattern. The flimsiness of the evidence on which the hypothesis of a common pattern rests is well shown by the summary in S. H. Hooke, *The Origins of Early Semitic Ritual*, London, 1938, p. 55 and *passim*. None of the main features of the Babylonian celebration is found in the Old Testament sources, but only secondary apotropaic measures, such as purification with the blood of a sacrificial animal, the scapegoat, and the like.

² T. H. Robinson, in *Myth and Ritual*, p. 186.

³ S. H. Hooke, *The Origins of Early Semitic Ritual*, p. 54, gives additional reasons for the assumption of the performance of the sacred marriage at Jerusalem; but they fail in two respects. The term *gigunu* was used for different rooms in the Mesopotamian temples (for references, see *Kingship and the Gods*, pp. 411 f., note 78); and the decoration of the divine bridal chamber with greenery does not explain why the whole population went to live in booths made of leafy boughs for seven days at the Feast of Tabernacles.

and *Ritual*, edited by Professor S. H. Hooke in 1933, we can read

'an account of the pattern assumed by the common elements of all these early rituals. The central feature is the importance of the king for the well-being of the community. . . . In both Egypt and Babylon the king is regarded as divine. He represents the god in the great seasonal rituals.

'The annual festival which was the centre and climax of all the religious activities of the year contained the following elements:

- (a) The dramatic representation of the death and resurrection of the god.
- (b) The recitation or symbolic representation of the myth of creation.
- (c) The ritual combat, in which the triumph of the god over his enemies was depicted.
- (d) The sacred marriage.
- (e) The triumphal procession, in which the king played the part of the god followed by a train of lesser gods or visiting deities.'¹

Our sources do not corroborate this synthesis. It is true that the king is everywhere the mediator between society and the superhuman powers. Moreover, we may well endorse Professor Evans-Pritchard's statement—in the Frazer Lecture for 1948—that 'kingship everywhere and at all times has been in some degree a sacred office'.² This explanation suffices for the Mesopotamian evidence, but not for Egypt. There a vast number of usages, texts, and representations consistently proclaim that Pharaoh was a god incarnate; but in Mesopotamia he was a *man* who was sometimes, during one short period, about 2000 B.C., deified. He then represented in the sacred marriage the god in whose changing fate the course of the seasons was reflected. Now in Egypt this god was Osiris; but Pharaoh never in his lifetime embodied Osiris, nor did Osiris celebrate the ritual of the sacred marriage.³

These are but a few of the objections against the claim that a

¹ *Myth and Ritual*, London, 1933, pp. 7 f.

² E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *The Divine Kingship of the Shilluk*, Cambridge, 1948, p. 36.

³ The points raised in this paragraph have been discussed in detail in my *Kingship and the Gods*, Chicago, 1948.

common pattern underlies Near Eastern religions; and they are not quibbles. For the presence and absence of certain features in either country is not accidental; some usages agree with the Mesopotamian outlook but not with that of Egypt. The reverse, of course, is also true. In such cases it is the differences between the two countries which are of the greatest importance, for they enable us to define the particular character of each civilization. It remains, then, to be seen whether 'essential similarities' exist at all, and this cannot be decided by discussing generalities. On the contrary, we must try to find a common theme and then analyse in detail its Egyptian and its Mesopotamian occurrence. I shall do this in the case of a myth and a rite which are alleged to form part of the 'pattern' common to both countries. The myth is the myth of creation, the rite that of the New Year.¹

The Egyptian and Babylonian myths of creation show at least three common features. They start with a series of negatives: heaven and earth and other phenomena 'had not yet come into being'. They assert that Chaos was a watery waste. And they describe creation as procreation; for since the universe was alive and the gods were immanent in nature, the unfolding of the cosmos could only be described as a theogony.

¹ One may admit the close relationship between the myths and rites of a religion, since they reflect an identical outlook, without falling into the error of those 'functionalist' and 'patternist' authors who declare that a myth is merely the spoken accompaniment of ritual. This is demonstrably incorrect. In Babylon, for instance, the New Year Festival lasted for twelve days, but the Epic of Creation was recited in its entirety on the evening of the fourth. Moreover, the ritual included episodes—the search by the goddess, the liberation of the god, the help he received from his son—which the Epic does not contain, and which in fact are incompatible with the heroic character given to Marduk in the Epic of Creation. Myths exist, to a greater or lesser degree, in their own right and give more or less independent versions of the events which the ritual, in its own way, re-enacts. Myths have an intellectual content which ritual often lacks. Their common features and their differences are well exemplified by the following instance: the grandiose conception of the Epic of Creation in which the Creator splits vanquished Chaos to shape Heaven and Earth is represented in the ritual, according to a text from Assur, by the cutting in two of a pigeon. In Egypt the myths are known to us in the form of allusions, which occur in official texts, and as consecutive stories in folk-tales only. (For an explanation, see Chapter V of my *Ancient Egyptian Religion*.) We do possess, however, several complete and consecutive rituals, including the words spoken with each act. Here too, then, myth and ritual, although part of a single world of thought, developed independently.

But the two myths which share these common features differ profoundly in general character. In Egypt the Creator appears alone in serene splendour while Chaos passively awaits the creative act. The Creator brings forth from his own body the first divine couple, Shu and Tefnut, Air and, probably, Moisture. These two give birth to Geb and Nut, Earth and Sky; and these, in their turn, bring forth four gods, including Osiris. This god seems to us to have a dual nature (which we shall discuss presently); he personified a certain aspect of natural life; and he was a former king, in fact the ruling Pharaoh's father and predecessor. His inclusion in the Ennead meant, therefore, that the Egyptian State was not viewed as a contingent political institution but as part of the order of Creation. The Creator, in fact, had assumed rule over all that he had made, and figures as the first king at the head of the Egyptian king-lists. Egyptian society was embedded in a universe which had gone forth, complete and unchanging, from the hands of the Creator.

The Mesopotamian myth of creation¹ describes, not a single comprehensive act, but a violent, confused, and protracted conflict which in the end results in Creation. Primeval Chaos consisted of sweet water and salt water, Apsu and Tiamat. They were male and female and brought forth the gods who disturbed the inertia congenial to Chaos. So Tiamat rose to destroy her children. The outcome of the terrifying conflict remained uncertain until the very end when one of the gods killed Tiamat. Only then, after 550 lines, does the myth describe how 'the Lord' split Tiamat into two and made heaven out of one half and the earth, as a canopy over the deep, out of the other. He also assigned to the gods their separate provinces (he had not *made* them; he was not a creator in an absolute sense) and, as an afterthought and a mere convenience, he created man. The purpose of man is to ease the life of the gods; he is 'burdened with their toil'.

¹ The latest translation, including early fragments and a discussion of the similarities with Genesis, is by Alexander Heidel, *The Babylonian Genesis*, Chicago, 1942.

Observe that here society forms no part of the order of creation; man must manage his *own* affairs as best he can. The head of the State was a mortal chosen by the gods to lead mankind in its servitude; but the gods could—and often did—withdraw his burden of responsibility and abandon king and people to destruction.

The New Year's Festival¹ could be celebrated either in spring or in autumn. Both seasons represent crises in the life of nature which are pregnant with the threat of famine. Hence society cannot remain passive but must, somehow, participate. During the dust and heat of the Mesopotamian summer the god who personifies the generative force of nature (Tammuz) was thought to have died or, rather, to be a captive in the land of the dead. In the autumn, when the crisis of change drew near, the New Year's Festival started in a mood of utter gloom in which the community attuned itself to the god's desperate condition. Elaborate purifications were undertaken, and the king, offering atonement for his own and the people's sins, was subjected to an indignity unthinkable in Egypt. He went to the temple, where his insignia were taken from him and he was struck in the face by the High Priest. Meanwhile the people became increasingly disturbed, running through the streets to search for the god. But on the seventh day—the festival lasted twelve days—there was a sudden reversal of mood: despondency changed to jubilation; the god was found, was liberated, and consummated his marriage with the mother goddess. Then, as the concluding act, the gods met in assembly 'to determine destinies'. They decided the fate of society during the coming year. It is characteristic of the feeling of complete dependence which pervades Mesopotamian religion that the greatest festival of the year starts in mourning and ends in a mood of hope rather than trust. It was by no means taken for granted that the revival of nature implied prosperity for man. On the contrary, it remained to be seen whether the gods would allow society to benefit by nature's

¹ A great deal has been written on this subject. For references see *Kingship and the Gods*, pp. 313-33, 408-12.

riches, and whatever their decision, its motivation was likely to remain obscure. As a Babylonian poem has it:

Who may comprehend the mind of gods in heaven's depth?
The thought of gods is like deep waters—who could fathom them?
How could mankind, beclouded, comprehend the ways of the
gods?¹

In Egypt it is the Nile flood which determines the seasons and the year. Celebrations which can qualify as a New Year's Festival were held in October or November when the fields emerge from the receding waters and ploughing and sowing start.²

The celebrations fall on New Year's Eve and New Year's Day; they centre in the god Osiris, and they are as much rites of royalty as seasonal rites. On New Year's Eve there were two ceremonies: the interment of Osiris and the raising of the Djed pillar. The 'interment of Osiris' celebrated the sowing of the corn in the Nile mud which had covered and fertilized the fields. It was an occasion for joy. A text at Denderah concerning this ritual ends, with reference to Osiris:

He awakes from sleep, he flies like the heron [benu bird], he makes his place in the sky as the moon.³

But the celebrations acquired a quite peculiar intensity when it so happened that in the foregoing year a king had died. Then 'the interment of Osiris' was the last phase of the royal burial rites, and the god who was annually worshipped on this day by the people was now present in their midst, in the body of their late king which was committed to the earth. The raising of the Djed pillar represented, or, I should say, brought about, the rebirth of Osiris in the Beyond.

On the next morning, on New Year's Day, the new king, who had acceded to the throne on his father's death, was crowned. But whether there was a coronation or not, each year on New

¹ Th. Jacobsen, in *Before Philosophy* (Penguin Books, 1949), p. 230.

² The 'Great Procession' at Abydos took place about the time of the rise of the Nile; it included a mock battle, but had the character of a royal funeral rather than a New Year Festival. See *Kingship and the Gods*, pp. 192 f., 203-7.

³ Translation kindly supplied by Professor Richard A. Parker.

Year's Day two further rites were performed: the Circuit of the Walls (i.e. of Memphis) and the Union of the Two Lands, both ceremonies which the First King of the First Dynasty of Egypt was believed to have performed when he founded a new capital for his united realm.

The clue to this interlocking of royal and seasonal celebrations lies in the nature of Osiris. Osiris personified natural vitality, but not, like Tammuz, its generative force as manifest in plants and animals. The province of Osiris's power was both larger and more specialized. He was manifest in those forms of life which seem to emerge periodically from the earth: the growing grain; the moon and the constellation Orion which rose, as the Egyptians thought, from the earth and re-entered it at their setting; and also the water of the Nile, believed to well up from the earth in the whirlpools of the First Cataract. But Osiris, manifest in these phenomena, was at the same time considered to be a dead king, a statement which means little unless we know how the Egyptians viewed kingship; and this we can learn from two sources: from ancient texts, which declare Pharaoh to be a god, and from certain contemporary African societies, where we can observe 'divine kingship' functioning in actuality. Among such people as the Dinka, Shilluk, or Baganda the king is believed to possess a peculiar power which brings the rain in due season and increases crops and cattle. It is not so much a power which the king wields consciously (although it is exercised through the observance of traditional usages and rites) but rather a quality inherent in the king, as if he were himself one of the natural powers upon which society depends and of which it holds a hostage in his person. This superhuman kingly power is not extinguished with death; some of these kings continue to act through their successor or through priests, or to give oracles, or to further in various ways the material welfare of their people.

But while we can observe divine kingship as a living social force in modern Africa, we find its most advanced intellectual formulation in the developed theology of Ancient Egypt. There the doctrine is made articulate; and (in its Egyptian form)

appears to be part and parcel of a peculiarly Egyptian conception of the world as a whole. The universe appeared to the Egyptian as an immutable order unfolded at the beginning of time when the Creator arose from the waters of Chaos to shape the world he was to rule.¹ Egyptian society (as we have seen) had from the first its place in the cosmic scheme and was ruled by one of the gods. This arrangement was permanent, although its appearances were subject to change. Kings succeeded one another on the throne, but in every one of them the same god was incarnate. This god was always Horus, the son and avenger of Osiris; Osiris was the ruler's dead father. By means of this perennially valid mythological formula the change in actual rulers was brought in harmony with the immutable order of creation.

If Osiris was at the same time thought to be a dead king and to impel the growth of the grain, and the rise of water in the Nile, from the earth in which he dwelt the combination did not unite two independent and conflicting notions, Osiris as nature god, Osiris as royal ancestor.² On the contrary, it embodied the Egyptians' conviction that kingship functioned on the cosmic as well as on the social level. The decrease of the water in the Nile and the sowing of the grain were celebrated as the death or burial of Osiris. But the realm of death is precisely the sphere of Osiris's power, because it does not represent the antithesis of life but a phase through which all natural life passes to emerge reborn. The seedcorn must die in the earth to raise the crops, the Nile must sink in its bed to rise in the fertilizing flood, the moon must wane, and even the sun sinks each night in the west

¹ I have attempted to show how the conviction that only the changeless is ultimately significant pervades the political institutions, the morals, the literature, and the art forms of the Egyptians in *Ancient Egyptian Religion*, New York, 1948.

² This is well illustrated by the character of Abydos as the centre of Osiris-worship, containing the necropolis of the kings of the first and second dynasties. This fact is obscured by a prevalent theory that Osiris derived originally from the Delta. This theory attaches undue weight to the fact that Osiris does not occur before the fifth dynasty in *private* tombs where the invocation of a royal ancestor must, in any case, be a secondary feature; it also ignores the evidence of the Memphite theology and the Abydene festivals. See *Kingship and the Gods*, pp. 200-10.

and enters the netherworld. It is this netherworld from which life re-emerges, this world of life-renewed-in-death, which is Osiris's realm. When we call him a dying god—or even if we should call him a dead god—we do not indicate his true nature. There is not, as in Mesopotamia, a dramatic change in his fortunes. He does not return, he is not liberated, he does not re-occupy the throne. The throne is for ever occupied by his son Horus, the living Pharaoh, and Osiris is for ever ensconced in the netherworld. During the Mesopotamian New Year's Festival at Babylon the captive god's son assisted the goddess in the liberation of his father; but it is nevertheless the father who immediately takes command after his liberation, who defeats the powers of death and Chaos and consummates his sacred marriage. And this contrast with Egypt does not merely imply that the Mesopotamians viewed their 'dying god' as more virile and aggressive than Osiris. For it is precisely the Mesopotamian god who is utterly dependent on the goddess, the universal mother.

This point is of decisive importance in the respective cosmologies. In Mesopotamia the goddess is supreme, because the source of all life is seen as female. Hence the god, too, descends from her and is called her son, although he is also her husband. In the ritual of the sacred marriage the goddess holds the initiative throughout.¹ Even in the conditions of Chaos the female Tiamat is the leader, and Apsu is merely her male complement. But in Egypt all creator-gods are male, even when they are chthonic gods like Ptah or Geb. There is no 'Mother Earth'. There is no 'Magna Mater'. Isis is subservient to Osiris. It is true that she resembles the Great Mother of Asia and Greece in that she, too, travels through the land bewailing Osiris and searching for him. But the significance of this common theme—the search—lies in the possibility of not-finding, which it leaves open. It takes into account that natural powers are beyond human control and that one cannot, of set purpose, reinstate a dead or vanished god. One can but hope that he will be found, that nature will revive. Isis resembles the Magna Mater in her

¹ *Kingship and the Gods*, p. 297.

search. But the passion of sorrow roused in the Asiatic cults shows that the finding of the god did not destroy a prevailing sense of tragedy, since all life is born unto death. The Great Mother is not only a dominant but also a tragic figure and Isis is not a mother goddess in the Asiatic sense at all.

The differences between Egyptian and Mesopotamian rituals which we have discussed are as great as the contrasts in the myths; they appear in general tendency and mood, as well as in specific details. In the person of Pharaoh a visible god communicated with the ineffable powers in nature—hence the lack of anxiety, the unqualified joy, which distinguish the Egyptian festivals from their Mesopotamian counterparts. On the other hand, essential features of the Mesopotamian New Year celebration are without parallel in Egypt: there is no atonement, no recital of the creation myth, no sacred marriage, no determination of destiny. Neither in spirit nor in the actual details of the performance did the New Year festivals in the two countries resemble one another—let alone conform to a common pattern. In fact, the pattern-theory could not have been held at all if the relevant facts had been more widely recognized.

It is now, I hope, also evident that the similarities between Egypt and Mesopotamia are by no means more important than their differences. Nor can it be maintained that they are primordial. If they were, they would become more numerous and pronounced when we go back in time. But the earliest historical sources show nothing of the sort; on the contrary, they illustrate how two distinct—and in many ways contrasting—civilizations took shape.¹

Perhaps you think that I have unduly neglected one 'essential similarity' between the religions we have compared. In both Egypt and Mesopotamia we observed a passionate preoccupation with the annual cycle of nature, and its expression in a figure described as 'the dying god'. This observation is true, but

¹ See my *The Birth of Civilisation in the Ancient Near East*, London and Bloomington, Indiana, 1951.

it is so general as to be almost meaningless. For a preoccupation with the natural events upon which society depends is as universal as the conception of natural phenomena in terms of human experience ('personification'). Approached in this way Osiris, Tammuz, Adonis, Persephone, or Dionysus do not differ; they cannot even be distinguished from the legion of minor figures, corn-demons and the like, whose stories are chronicled in *The Golden Bough*. It can hardly be said, then, that these gods are understood at all. A more specific definition of their character is given by Farnell, who writes:

'The old Mediterranean ritual of sorrow, with its periodic wailing for the departed divinity, . . . was usually expressive of the emotion of natural man, excited by the disappearance of verdure, by the gathering of the harvest or by the fall of the year. . . . The great typical example is "the women wailing for Tammuz".'¹

But surely this description is inadequate. Emotion may be the mainspring of ritual, but the myths of the gods in question have also an intellectual content, wider in scope than early man's preoccupation with the ebb and flow of natural life. This last aspect was, so to speak, the objective side of myths and cults. But they had also a subjective aspect; everywhere, for instance, the withering of vegetation was regarded as an image of man's own transitoriness. Consequently the various myths reflect man's attitude towards death and give form to his expectations. The resurrection of the god may be seen as a prefiguration of man's ultimate destiny, as in Egypt. Or man's mortality may be accepted in bitter contrast to the perennial life of nature, as was done in Mesopotamia. This difference is evidently not a simple contrast of mood or feeling but a consequence of the orientation of speculative thought within each country. A generic term like 'the dying god' does not correspond to any religious experience at all, and in treating such terms as realities we hypostasize abstractions and fall victims to our methods.

Yet even the strictest nominalist must admit that Tammuz,

¹ L. R. Farnell, *Greek Hero Cults and Ideas of Immortality*, Oxford, 1921, p. 27.

Osiris, and the other gods we named have something in common. There is at least a formal resemblance: each presents the image of a divine personage passing through death. And here the distinction we made a moment ago is useful. Hitherto comparisons have been exclusively concerned with the objective aspects of myths and cults, their significance as representations of actuality, of natural processes, or of ritual usages. But their formal resemblance, the resemblance of images as symbolic forms, surely concerns their subjective aspect. It reflects similarities on a deeper, a more inward level. Is it possible to interpret these?

The interpretation of symbols has at all times been a fascinating hobby, but in our day it has acquired new prestige. Psychoanalysis claims to possess a scientific technique of interpretation. It also maintains that symbols are both universal and transparent. Freud was born two years after Frazer. And if I stress the contemporaneity of these two men who have influenced Western thought so profoundly, it is because their discoveries show a certain family likeness. Both attempted to penetrate beyond the complexity and variety of cultural symbols; both reduced them to the outcome of an essentially simple process. Frazer saw the whole host conjured up in *The Golden Bough* as sprung from a universal preoccupation with food and fertility; Freud found an equally universal one in the *libido*, the sexual appetite. Frazer rarely touched upon the dynamics of evolution, but Freud tried to explain it as a mechanistic process: the *libido* could be suppressed, intensified, and sublimated, a transformation not unlike that which turned the potential energy of a river into electricity. Both Freud and Frazer reduced the complexities of civilization to something essentially natural, simple—and, we may add, trivial. We have seen that Frazer sometimes doubted whether this result was worth achieving. Within the realm of psychoanalysis Jung asserted that it was not. In fact he made a point of showing that Freud oversimplified; and he has throughout attempted to rescue the dignity of man by rediscovering the metaphysical depth of his imaginative symbols. This was by no means only gratifying to

his patients, whose problems, no doubt often petty enough, gained in his hands almost cosmic proportions. It also proved, as we shall see, of considerable interest to the historian of religion. Unfortunately Jung's work shows a tendency not only to elucidate but to create myths. The terms he uses, whether they denote phenomena he observed or mere working hypotheses, become for him mysterious and potent entities; 'the subconscious' can, in his own words, be something that is a menace to primitive people;¹ 'the collective unconscious' not only becomes a venerable reservoir of racial memories but archetypal images emerge from it and are evidence (again in Jung's words) of its structure.² Since Jung treats dreams and ancient myths as equivalent, these images can only have one essential meaning; they reveal the struggle of mankind towards something that Jung calls 'individuation'.³ Thus for Jung the history of mankind is a kind of 'Pilgrim's Progress' understood exclusively in terms of vicissitudes of the soul. A great deal of this seems to me specious.

And yet it would be wrong to underrate the significance of his early work for the problem which interests us. For example, Jung, like Freud, was struck by the frequency with which a 'return to the mother', often in sexual terms, occurred in dreams and in mythology. Freud postulated, as its root, a quasi-natural incestuous desire. Jung rejected this interpretation. He saw it as the expression of an intellectual anxiety (namely, the recognition that death is inescapable) in the form of a regression to the source of life. Jung's interpretation elucidates a variety of Egyptian texts and usages. Many poems, sometimes of great beauty, represent the sky-goddess Nut, or the cow-goddess Hathor (but never Isis), as the mother to whom the sun at night or the king at death returns; they enter into her so that they may be reborn. The dead king, who is Osiris, is laid in a sarcophagus explicitly identified with Nut, Osiris's mother. The Djed pillar raised on New Year's Eve is likewise the goddess con-

¹ C. G. Jung and C. Kerényi, *Essays on a Science of Mythology*, Bollingen Series, xxii, New York, 1949, p. 101.

² *Ibid.*, p. 104.

³ C. G. Jung, *The Integration of Personality*, London, 1933.

taining Osiris. A curious title applied to Pharaoh and certain other gods—Ka-mutef, Bull of his mother—becomes intelligible as part of this theology of rebirth, and so do many other facts which hitherto have remained entirely obscure.¹

I must add that in Mesopotamia the 'return to the mother' plays a less prominent part because there death was—not without bitterness—accepted as the term of existence. But the motif is, of course, implied in the sacred marriage of Ishtar and Tammuz which restores nature's vitality.

It seems to me that a careful and critical use of psycho-analytical discoveries may well reveal 'essential similarities' in the imagery of various religions on a level altogether different from those we have envisaged. This does not mean that we can call them archetypal images in Jung's sense, who speaks of 'forms existing *a priori*, or biological norms of psychic activity'.² On the contrary, instead of accepting the universality of archetypes *a priori* we must note the presence or absence of certain images or themes. The motif of the son's hostility towards his father, the Uranus and Saturn motif, is absent in the Near East, where the son is always the father's helper and avenger. The mythical motif of parthenogenesis plays no part either. The divine child as a saviour appears in Egypt as a late development. Yet I believe that here is a line of inquiry which deserves to be followed up, provided we do not allow general concepts to blur the actual evidence. This granted, the research I have in mind would be an excellent specific against the one weakness of a morphological approach, to wit isolation. At the beginning of this lecture I quoted an Egyptologist who deliberately excluded alien material from his purview. He should have realized that the comparative method is most valuable when it leads, not to the spurious equation, but to a more subtle distinction of similar features in different civilizations. In the same way a search for 'essential similarities' in religious symbols would not diminish but deepen our understanding. It would reveal not merely the variety but also the range of imaginative conceptions sprung

¹ *Kingship and the Gods*, pp. 168–80.

² Jung and Kerényi, *op. cit.*, p. 219, note.

from the common ground of human experience. It would refute the epigram of the arch-morphologist Spengler: 'Humanity is but an empty phrase.'

There is one kind of similarities we have not mentioned and which, in concluding, we must briefly consider: similarities in the religious imagery of cultures which are not contemporary but consecutive; not independent but admittedly related. This is the problem of the survival of symbols which has been the lifelong concern of the founder of the Warburg Institute. It does not differ essentially from those we have discussed, but the danger of misinterpreting the evidence is especially great where we have the certainty of historical continuity. It needs an effort, for instance, to realize that the Isis worshipped throughout the Roman Empire shared little more than her name with the goddess of Ancient Egypt. Even Plutarch, who was well informed, has hellenized Isis and Osiris so thoroughly that his book has long been a source of confusion to Egyptologists. There is no authority in Pharaonic sources for the character and some of the adventures which he attributes to these gods. Yet Plutarch does so, not because he was indifferent, but, on the contrary, because of the spell Isis and Osiris had cast over him and over his contemporaries. For the appeal of religious symbols is not dependent upon a correct understanding of their original meaning. Once created, their lasting forms challenge the imagination; they may be charged with a new significance which they themselves called forth, and may stimulate a new integration in alien surroundings. Thus Isis, the devoted but subservient consort of Osiris, became the vehicle of Plutarch's philosophy, his peculiar amalgam of Platonic and Stoic views; but she also became the compassionate Great Mother of popular Roman religion. In this case the new meaning vastly exceeds the original one in scope. On the other hand, symbols sometimes survive as mere shadows or parodies of their former selves. When Renaissance poets and painters chose Venus and Adonis as their subject, their personages had very little in common with the Mother Goddess and her son as worshipped at Byblos; for the Renaissance saw them through the frivolous eyes of Ovid. To quote another example:

the Olympic gods survived throughout the Middle Ages as astral and planetary powers dominating man's fate. The names, the attributes, and even the pictorial images survived. But they emphasize the truth that survival is never mere continuity but continuity in change. Once again, then, our danger lies in an exclusive interest in the similarities themselves; for it is—as always—the cultural context which holds the secret of their significance.

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