

SUN WORSHIP IN SYRIA. By C. R. CONDER, R.E.

THE subject of the aboriginal superstition of the Syrian tribes is one of great interest but of some difficulty, as many remains and objects supposed by travellers to be relics of Sun-worship have been found to be very modern, while millstones and oil-rollers have often been mistaken for solar emblems, and ruined limekilns for Sun Temples.

Nevertheless we know for certain that the astronomical worship of Babylon, of the Hittites, Phœnicians, and Egyptians, was also the Canaanite creed: that Saturn or Moloch was worshipped as a Sun God by human sacrifices; that the licentious rites of Ashtoreth or the Venus Pandemos were observed even in Jerusalem; and that Thammuz, the Syrian Adonis, was annually mourned both on Lebanon and in Judea. We know that the shrines of these divinities, both at Jerusalem and also at Bethel and on Carmel, stood side by side with the altars of Jehovah; and we should therefore naturally expect that some traces of this idolatrous worship should still exist in Palestine.

Taking then in order the chief centres of Baal worship we must commence first with Bethlehem, where St. Jerome assures us the rites of Thammuz were practised in his own time. Here we still find a sacred grotto which early tradition (not however supported by anything in the four Gospels) has now consecrated as the cradle of Christ. It must not be forgotten that the Sacred Cave forms a very important feature of the ritual of Sun-worship, and the connection with the legend of Thammuz can hardly be accidental. Not only was the cave of Mithrah an essential feature of the rejoicings of the *Dies Natalis Invicti Solis*, but the Chapel of Moloch (mentioned by Kimchi in commenting on Mishna Sanhed vii, 7) seems to have been a similar subterranean sanctuary; while the idea of the sun issuing from a cave is traced back even earlier than the Babylonian times to the Accadian name for the winter solstice month, "the Cavern of the Dawn." The peculiar rites which are celebrated at the Latin Christmas ceremony at Bethlehem—like the Holy Fire issuing from the Cave-tomb at Jerusalem—have striking affinities with the ritual of Mithra; and we shall find that throughout Syria the Sacred Cave almost always occurs in connection with Sun Temples.

At Jerusalem itself the Temples of Ashtoreth and Chemosh (Venus and Saturn) stood on Olivet in Solomon's time; and the rounded summit of this mountain still supports a round building in a round court covering the sacred footprint now said to have been that of Christ. Beneath this sanctuary there is a sacred vault^s or cave called *Rahibat Bint Hasan* by the Arabs, the Cave of Huldah among the Jews, or of St. Pelagia among the Christians—in each case a female deity. The site thus chosen for the Ascension does not agree with the words of St. Luke (xxiv, 50) where the event is recorded as having occurred near Bethany; and it is perhaps more probable that the old Sun Temple of Chemosh stood on this hill-top. The

modern name of Olivet is *et Tôr*—a Chaldee word from a root cognate with *Tzur* (“a rock”) and not to be confused with *Thôr*, a bull. *Tôr* is the term applied to rounded or isolated hill-tops throughout Palestine, as for instance at Gerizim and Tabor, and most of these *Tôrs* are still, and have from remote antiquity been, sacred mountains. The sacred footprint is moreover not an invention of mediæval monks, but a common feature of Indian nature worship (see note below). In Jerusalem we have another sacred rock with a sacred footprint, namely, the *Sakhrâh* with the *Kadam en Neby* or “prophet’s footprint,” which in the 12th century was called the footprint of Christ. Here also we find a sacred cave; and in the *Aksa* mosque is another footprint, namely the *Kadam Sidna ’Asia*, which has been described in its present position since 600 A.D.

North of Jerusalem we find the site now generally recognised as *Nob*; namely, the village of *Sh’afât*, where Jewish tradition states that the Tabernacle once stood (see *Mishna Zebakhim xiv*). The name *Nob* is radically identical with *Neby*, and also with *Nebo* the Assyrian Mercury. This deity was symbolised by a stone or a stone-heap, and he was one of the gods of the pre-Islamite Arabs, who worshipped stones (*bœtuli* or stone-heaps) as representing *Allah* and sacred trees (the *Asherah* or “grove” of the Canaanites) as symbolic of *Allât* the female deity. The worship of Mercury included the throwing of stones on a heap as mentioned in the Talmud (*Sanhed vi, 7*) and also by classic authors; and it is of interest to point out that there is a most remarkable natural monument such as was understood by the name *Zikr* or *Ed*—a high conical rock peak (as noticed under the title *Khûrbet es Som’a*, “ruin of the heap,” in the *Memoir to sheet 17*) immediately east of the road to Jerusalem at *Sh’afât*.

Bethel was also a centre of idolatrous worship side by side with the “School of the Prophets.” The Altar of the Golden Calf stood here, as well as the cairn which Jacob raised and anointed. Colonel Wilson was, I believe, the first to point out the curious circle of stones immediately north of the village (see P. E. F. Photograph) which though much decayed reminds one irresistibly of the rude stone temples of our own country.

At *Shiloh* we find no marks of Sun worship, but the lofty mountain called *Tell ’Astr* north of Bethel is no doubt the old *Baal Hazor* or “*Baal* of the enclosure,” an ancient circle of stones now destroyed. Traces of a similar circle were observed south-east of *Jenfîn*, and a rude stone monument described in the *Memoir* (sheet ix, *Deir Ghuzdleh*) has every appearance of being an ancient altar. A second altar west of the great plain at *Abu ’Amr* is built of undressed stones, and beside it is a sacred tree and tomb and a cave with steps leading down.

As we approach Galilee we find other centres on *Tabor* and *Carmel*. The ancient *Tabor* (“umbilicus”) is the modern *Jebel et Tôr*; *Josephus*

NOTE.—I should mention that I am indebted for this piece of information to General Forlong, whose learned work on ancient religions is shortly to be published, and who has directed my attention to the question of Syrian idolatry generally, and given me much valuable assistance in understanding it.

calls it Itabyrium, and another mountain of that name in Rhodes was consecrated to Jupiter. It is thus perhaps that the scene of the Transfiguration has been shifted from its proper site near Baniyas to the sacred mountain of Tabor. On Carmel we find the altar of Baal beside the ruined altar of Jehovah in the time of Elijah. The great peak of el Mahrakah ("the place of Sacrifice") at the south-east end of Carmel is still revered by the Carmelite Monks and by the Druses of Esfia, and appears to have been the place visited by Julian the Apostate when he sacrificed to the God Carmel, who had no temple but only an altar. The peak is admirably adapted for a sanctuary of the Sun God, and stands up conspicuously, being visible from near Jaffa in fine weather. Beneath is a sacred tree beside a well.

It is very remarkable that the tomb of Joseph is flanked by two pillar-like altars, on which sacrifices are still offered by fire. Such pillar-like altars are known to have belonged to the ritual of sun or fire-worship, like the fire towers of the Guebres; and it might be suggested that the extraordinary conical mounds at *Málkah* near Jerusalem, one of which is 30 feet high, and 20 feet diameter at the top, and even the great conical hillock of Tell el Fúl, structures for which no date and no good explanation has yet been offered, may be remains of ancient altars or sacred beacons. In Galilee we find the sacrifice of articles by fire still observed by the Jews at the tomb of Bar Jochai, on the side of Jebel *Jermák*, the highest mountain of the district, and a sacred cave occurs close by. Of the rude cromlechs discovered by Lieutenant Kitchener in this district, one is called *Hajr ed Dumm*, "the stone of blood," no doubt from a tradition of sacrifices there offered.

Many sacred stones occur throughout the country, as the *Hajr Dabkan*, near Mar Saba, the traditions concerning which were collected by Mr. Drake, and the *Hajr Sidna 'Aisa* on the side of the conical mountain called Neby Duh, and the *Hajáret en Nusdra*, or "Christian's Stone" above Tiberias, now connected with a monkish tradition. Nor must we forget the *Mesháhed* (bætu) Edoth or "Witnesses") which pious pilgrims erect whenever they come within sight of a famous shrine. The Survey Cairns were occasionally thought to be sacred structures, as at Jeb'a, where the Dervish volunteered to "pray for the pillar in the day of our journey." Among the ancient Arabs such stones were at once the bodies of divinities, and also altars on which their victims were offered.

The great centre of sun worship was, however, apparently on Hermon, and the numerous temples which were built on this holy mountain, as late as the 2nd century A.D., were found by Colonel Warren to face the rising sun, seen to such advantage from the summit.

On the top of Hermon is a plateau, and from this rises a sort of peak or natural altar, round which a circle of masonry has been built, while a small pit is sunk in the top of the rock. There was no temple actually on the summit, though a small one remains outside the circle on the south. On the north is a sacred cave with a flight of steps. Other caves

lower down the mountain are used by the Druses for the retreat of their initiated, and the Druses are known to preserve the rites of the Gnostics, to whom sun worship was familiar.

At Tyre, on an isolated hillock, stands the fane of Neby M'ashûk, "the beloved of women," no doubt the ancient Adonis or Melkarth, and the tradition of this local sun god is preserved in the annual festival of St. Mekhlar, observed in this city, when his votaries descend to fish for the purple-shell or Chilson, which is mythically connected with the history of the Tyrian Hercules, or Melkarth.

The great shrine of Venus and Adonis at Aphêka, lately described by Mr. Lawrence Oliphant, was destroyed by Constantine; but many practices belonging to this worship survive among the Nuseiriyeh and Ism'ailieh, who worship the sun, moon, and elements in the northern Lebanon, and even human sacrifice is said by the Maronites to be one of their customs; arelic of the human sacrifices of Baal, Moloch, or Saturn among the Canaanites and Phœnicians, and a certain indication of sun worship. In connection with this question, it is curious to note how persistent this tradition of secret human sacrifice is in the Levant. Gibbon describes the charges of this kind brought by pagans against the early Christians, and St. Epiphanius gives a detailed account of the "Perfect Passover" of the early Gnostics—the sacrifice of a child. The same charge was brought against the Templars in the 13th century, and it is yet a common imputation against the Jew in the East, as is shown by the following passage in one of the Sultan's proclamations quoted by Mr. Oliphant.

"We cannot permit the Jewish nation (whose innocence of the crime alleged against them is evident) to be vexed and tormented upon accusations which have not the least foundation in truth," viz., "that they were accustomed to sacrifice a human being, to make use of his blood at their feast of the Passover."

East of Jordan some traces of the worship of Ashtoreth should be found at her famous shrine. Mr. Oliphant has already described the curious pillar of Job, which had never been visited since the 5th century; but I believe no explanation has been offered of the occurrence of solitary pillars, as for instance, north of Acre, and near Baalbek. There seems every probability that they are columns on which the hermits who imitated St. Simeon Stylites used to seat themselves—a practice much older than Christianity, and directly connected with the worship of the Sun's creative power. Many of these hermits lived in the 5th century in Syria, more especially near Aleppo, where are the ruins of the great Cathedral of St. Simeon. Similar practices are recognisable among the Hermits, who by contemplating their own stomachs (like the Therapeutæ, or the Indian Fakirs) at length beheld the sacred "Light of Tabor."

It is not too much to say that every isolated round or conical mountain top in Palestine, was once a seat of sun-worship. Thus at *Sheikh Iskander*, west of the Plain of Esdraelon, on a conical volcanic peak, we find the shrine of a prophet, who is described as contemporary with Abraham, and as having rams' horns like the sun-god Jupiter Ammon

Neby Duhy is a similar conical peak north-east of the last, and has a domed shrine on the top. The legend attached states that the bones of the saint were carried there by his dog, which reminds us of the Parsee veneration of dogs (the companions of Mithra), who to the horror of Greek writers were permitted to devour the bodies of the most noble among the Persian fire-worshippers.

The translation of bones or relics is a common Moslem tradition. Thus on Ebal we have the sacred shrine of the *'Amād ed Dīn*, "pillar of the faith," and near it the sacred cave of *Sitti Islāmīyeh*, who gives her name to the mountain, and whose bones were carried through the air to this spot from Damascus.

The remarkable mountain near Jericho with its natural conical top called *'Esh el Ghurāb*, or "Raven's Nest," is specially described in "Tent Work," chap. xiii, as having been supposed by the Crusaders to be the Mountain of the Temptation, a tradition still extant among the Bedawin. This curious but impossible legend may perhaps have its origin in an ancient sun-myth, connected with the hill, and adopted by the Byzantine Monks.

The conical form of the summit of the Kurn Sartabeh (the Jewish beacon station where a fire was lighted on the appearance of the new moon) is also very remarkable. It might almost be cited in favour of the identification of this place with the "witness" altar of Ed, which I proposed in 1874, and to which the main objection lies in the opinion of Josephus that Ed was East of Jordan.

The cone is 270 feet high, the sides sloping at about 35°. There is an oval surrounding the building on the summit, and formed by a mound of stones rudely heaped up. This measures 90 feet E. and W. by 260 N. and S. The central building is a platform or foundation built in 10 courses of large drafted stones (possibly crusading work). Towards the north of the platform we found traces of burning, showing that a beacon had once been lighted here. The sides of the cone are artificially trimmed from the natural rock. To the east is a terrace with caves, an aqueduct collected surface drainage and carried the water to rocky reservoirs just beneath the peak. The general effect is that of an ancient Sun Temple which has been converted later into a small fortress.

The shrines on every mountain, and under every green tree, have been already described in "Tent Work." The prophets called Belân, Baliân, and B'aln, are perhaps the modern representatives of the ancient Baalim, and a male and female saint are constantly worshipped, as were Baal and Ashtoreth in shrines near to one another, many of which have sacred caves beneath.

Neby Turfīni again possibly takes his name from the Teraphim, or "serpent images" such as those that Rachel stole from her father Laban.

Those who are interested in ancient superstitions may find this short enumeration of facts of some value, and the subject (in spite of the difficulty of collecting reliable information) is one which deserves to be further pursued.